

THE AIR COMMANDER IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS CAMPAIGN:

UNRIVALED UNITY OF EFFORT IN JOINT AIR OPERATIONS

BY

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A THESIS PROVIDED TO THE FACULTY OF
THE SCHOOL OF ADVANCED AIR AND SPACE STUDIES
FOR COMPLETION OF GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

SCHOOL OF ADVANCED AIR AND SPACE STUDIES

AIR UNIVERSITY

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

JUNE 2011

APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

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DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank my research advisor, Dr. Thomas Hughes, who as my professor in *Air Power* seminar, introduced me to air operations in the Solomon Islands Campaign. His excitement in this discussion peaked my interest, and upon further analysis, I realized this was a subject worth pursuing. Throughout the process, he has provided me invaluable mentoring and encouragement.

I would also like to thank the support from the tremendous staffs at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, Library of Congress, National Archives II, and the Marine Corp Archives. Their guidance saved me countless hours of valuable research time.

The brainpower at SAASS is remarkable, and I would be remiss without thanking the leadership, faculty, administration, and students of this fine school, who have made this year the most rewarding academic experience of my career.

Above all, I wish to thank my wife, who has supported this endeavor with compassion and understanding, and my two sons, who despite the daily grind, always bring a smile to my face and remind me of the important things in life.

ABSTRACT

The Solomon Islands air command and control structure was unique in history. The Commander, Air Forces Solomons (COMAIRSOLS) rotated periodically between military services, and was in charge of all expeditionary Marine, Navy, and Army Air forces on the islands. Although the operation is the best example of joint air effort, not only in the war, but for 50 years thereafter, there is little literature on the distinct command structure, its influence on operations, and how leaders overcame service rivalries, despite the intense interservice debates of that era.

The thesis first focuses on the senior leaders in the South Pacific. They set the organizational construct, chose joint air leaders, and provided tremendous leadership and support to these subordinate commanders. The three Solomon air commanders appearing in this study were selected because they led the operation at pivotal moments during the campaign. Their charisma and courage were as important to the success of the campaign as was the organizational structure itself. Without the right people in Solomon air leader positions, the results of the campaign may have been in question. Together this team of air leaders was crucial in turning the tide in the Pacific War, and showed that, even in a time of intense interservice rivalry, if the right person is in command, the service they belong to does not matter. Leaders tend to put aside interservice rivalry in matters of survival, and the more they distance themselves from political air power debates, the easier it is to ensure success of air operations.

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Introduction

World War II was the first conflict in which every branch of the United States military employed air forces. Then, as now, each military service had different thoughts on how to best utilize the airplane to meet military objectives. This led to a myriad of ways in which they organized, commanded, and used their forces. In many cases, in the joint environment, these organizational structures and command mindsets collided, sometimes to the detriment of an overall operation. These problems did not improve following the war. In fact, with the new independence of the Air Force, they grew worse.

During the Korean War, the Air Force, Navy, and Marines struggled to define their command relationships. There, the Commander in Chief, Far East (CINCFE), delegated “coordination control” to the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) when it operated with naval air on assigned missions, but few agreed what that entailed. For instance, the Air Force commander tried to get the Navy to conform to Air Force operating procedures, but that proved impossible due to service differences in technology, attitudes, and practices. Eventually the Air Force commander gave up coordination with the Navy and assigned it a section of airspace that was its responsibility alone.¹ The results were a series of compromises that did not achieve any semblance of unity of command.

Joint air operations in the Vietnam War were no better than in Korea, and many look to the war as the low point in the command of air operations. Vietnam represents a failure in unity of effort and command of airpower still intensely discussed today. There were many internal battles: over CAS and rotary-wing aircraft among the Air Force, Army, and Marines; over strategy, target selection, and overall priorities among Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), Commander in Chief,

¹ Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 28.

Pacific (CINCPAC), and the White House; over operational and tactical control between Strategic Air Command (SAC) and Tactical Air Command (TAC); and over "strike" between the USAF and the Navy.²

As during the Korean War, compromises made in Vietnam simply allowed each service to preserve its mode of operation instead of creating solutions geared toward accomplishing missions. Mission direction became that war's coordination control, with no better results than in Korea. At best, the USAF and Navy achieved a degree of deconfliction through the route-package system, which separated geographic areas of command control according to service.³ In both wars, an air commander's lack of control over combat operations involving multiple air forces degraded airpower's ability to achieve objectives.

The period following Vietnam brought more failures. The disasters of Desert One and Beirut, and the problems in Grenada, made manifest the clash between combatant commanders focused on a given mission and inter-service rivalry in the Department of Defense.

These tensions led legislative changes. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 gave considerable power to combatant commanders at the expense of the services, whose roles were reduced to organizing, training, and equipping their respective forces.⁴ This allowed the combatant commander to achieve unity of effort in combat operations. Although the act increased the power of the combatant commander, who has traditionally been an Army or Navy officer, the act invited the Air Force to develop a new command concept, the Joint Forces Air Component Commander (JFACC) around which the service could develop its ideas for unity of command on the same tier as

² Stephen O. Fought, "The Tale of the C/JFACC: A Long and Winding Road," *Airpower Journal*, 18, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 22.

³ Fought, "The Tale of the C/JFACC," 22.

⁴ Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 109.

naval and ground forces.⁵ It would not take long for this concept to be put to the test.

The shining moment for air power unity of effort arrived with the Gulf War. All of the services accepted, at least in principle, the need for a single jurisdiction over allied airpower.⁶ Even General Norman Schwarzkopf, who had final authority over the air forces, was clear in his support of the JFACC concept. He instructed his division commanders, "There's only going to be one guy in charge of the air: Horner. If you want to fight the interservice battles, do it after the war."⁷

The experience and success of joint air operations in the Gulf War highlighted the importance for unity of command of air power.⁸ This unity of effort appeared original and groundbreaking, and is still viewed as the pinnacle of joint operations.

Did it really take 40 years to get it right? In actuality, over six decades ago, it took only six months. The shining example of joint air operations occurred during the first war each service had its own airplanes. The defining moment occurred during the Solomon Islands Campaign in the South Pacific during World War II, where joint air power was a key contributor, maybe even a determinant factor in turning the war in the Pacific. In the Solomon Islands, commanders reached a high water-mark of jointness in command and operations never seen before and not seen again for decades. This joint air campaign proved vital to turning the tide of war in the Pacific.

In the summer of 1942, just six months after the attack at Pearl Harbor, the war in the Pacific approached a tipping point. Despite the American victory at Midway, the Japanese still had superior numbers of ships, aircraft, and people in the Pacific, keeping the Allies on the defensive throughout Asia and the Pacific. Singapore and the Philippines

⁵ Fought, "The Tale of the C/JFACC," 23.

⁶ Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, 130.

⁷ Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, 130.

⁸ Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1996), 128.

fell, and the Japanese prepared to capture Port Moresby in New Guinea in preparation for an invasion of Australia.⁹ In addition, with American resources prioritized to the fight against Germany, there had yet to be an offensive Allied campaign in the Pacific.

Strategic Importance

Despite the American focus on Germany, in Washington Admiral Ernest King recognized the importance of the South Pacific and its geographic proximity to other theaters. Though territory itself had little value, it served as a critical gateway to vital areas. For Japan, control of the area would help to secure its subjugation of Southeast Asia and serve as a stepping-stone to the expansion of its perimeter. Conversely, if the Allies gained control over the area, they would be situated to threaten the resources of the East Indies that Japan depended on for its war economy.¹⁰

The Allies scrapped plans for a counter-attack on July 5, when American radio intelligence and aerial reconnaissance indicated the Japanese were building an airfield on Guadalcanal.¹¹ Completion of this airstrip meant Japanese long-range aircraft could threaten the main lines of communication between the United States and Australia. In addition, north of Guadalcanal, Japanese forces completed other airfields and fortified major installations to support combat operations further into the Solomon Islands. In particular, the Japanese base at Rabaul on New Britain stood as a major foothold in the South Pacific. Admiral King and Admiral Chester Nimitz, the commander of the Central Pacific Forces, knew they could not let the Japanese complete the airstrip. Guadalcanal became the top priority.

⁹ Eugene L. Rasor, *The Solomon Islands Campaign, Guadalcanal to Rabaul: Historiography and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997), 6.

¹⁰ Eric M. Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky: The Air War in the South Pacific* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 5.

¹¹ Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal* (New York: Random House, 1990), 36. Cited in Phillipart, 3.

Importance of Air Power

Geography also influenced the level of importance air had in the theater. Air bases themselves became the prime strategic objects of importance and almost all air, ground, and naval action aimed to seize air bases and places air bases could be built.¹² Therefore, ground and naval power without air power was nearly useless. If one side dominated the air over the ocean or the tiny but critical ports sustaining jungle airstrips, it could prevent amphibious attacks and allow friendly supply to maintain control. If it lost superiority, its own bases would be cut off and rendered useless, leaving individual garrisons and unoccupied territory isolated and vulnerable to enemy assault.¹³ Although land forces were important to occupy territory, and without seapower it was impossible to provide enough supplies to sustain forces, without air cover, warships were in deadly peril, merchant ships could not function, and armies would be vulnerable to air attack.¹⁴ Therefore, airpower was vital to victory to both sides in the South Pacific.

¹² Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky*, 6.

¹³ Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky*, 7.

¹⁴ Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky*, 8.

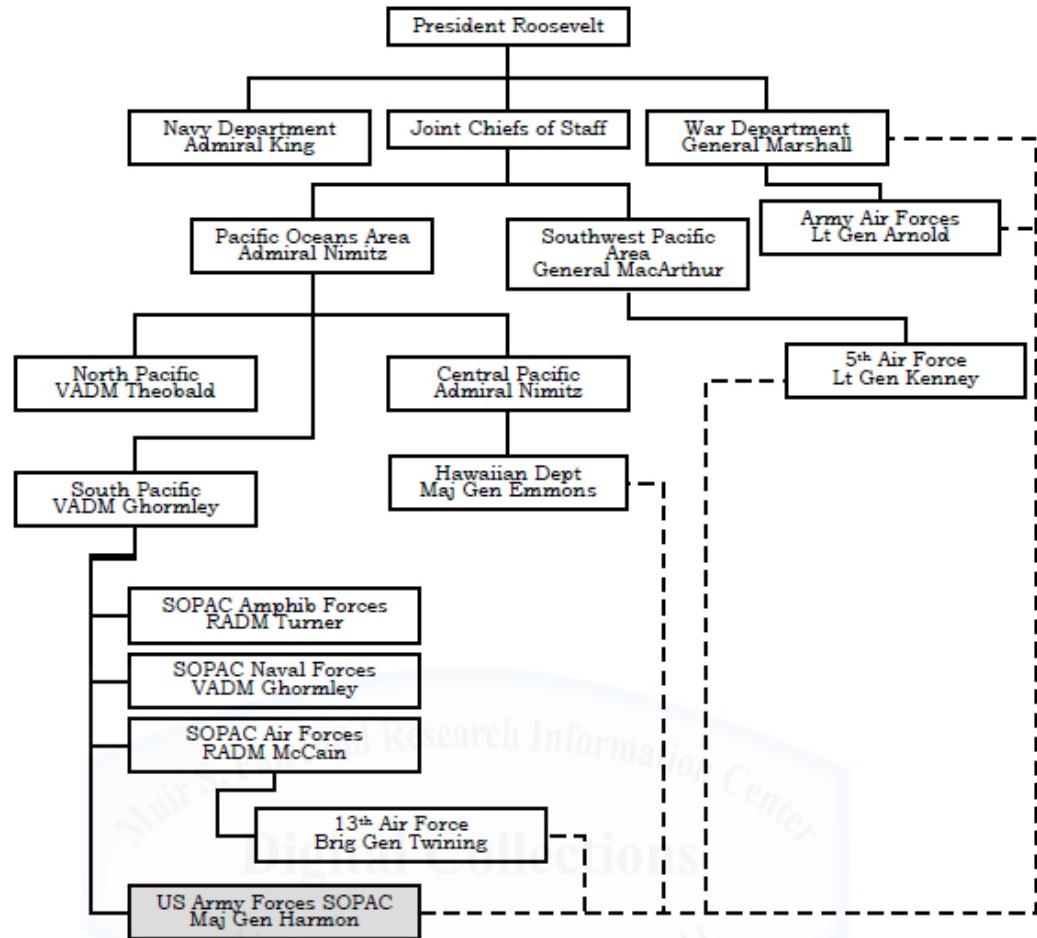


Figure 1: Chain of Command in the Pacific. **Source:** Louis Morton, *United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (1962; new imprint, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2000), 254. Cited and modified by Novotny, 53.

Command and Control

In the South Pacific, the services operated a diverse array of aircraft. Because airpower was so important in theater, employing it in a joint manner was paramount to achieving unity of effort. The United States defined the command structure on April 18, 1942, coinciding with the need for offensive action in the Solomon Islands region.¹⁵ From his headquarters in Hawaii, Admiral Chester Nimitz commanded mostly naval forces in the Pacific Ocean Area, which consisted of the North,

¹⁵ Raso, *The Solomon Islands Campaign*, 23.

Central, and South Pacific geographic regions. General Douglas MacArthur commanded the Southwest Pacific Area, consisting mostly of Army forces. His headquarters moved between the Philippines and Australia during the course of the war.¹⁶ Each of these commanders fell under the direct oversight of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, with Admiral King overseeing the Navy and General George Marshall overseeing Army forces.

Under Nimitz, Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley led the South Pacific command in 1942. His responsibility included planning Guadalcanal operations, and he had Army, Navy, and Marine forces under his control. Ghormley had three task forces as he prepared for the Guadalcanal operations. Task Force 61, a carrier expeditionary force led by Vice Admiral Frank Fletcher; Task Force 62, an amphibious force under Rear Admiral Kelly Turner; and Task Force 63, the land-based air force under Rear Admiral John S. McCain, composed of units from the Navy, the Marine Corps, the Air Force, and the Royal New Zealand Air Force.¹⁷

For his part, Admiral McCain faced the difficulty of orchestrating the efforts of four separate land-based air forces. When the Marines were ashore on Guadalcanal, an additional dimension was introduced: land-based air from all services together on one airfield.¹⁸ McCain solved the problem by placing all service units under the control of Guadalcanal-based subordinate.

The Commanding General of South Pacific Forces (COMGENSOPAC), Major General Millard Harmon, objected to a commander from another service having operational control of Army Air Force aircraft. Therefore, he lobbied for a separate Air Force component commander reporting directly to Admiral Ghormley, or at least a separate

¹⁶ James A Winnefeld and Dana J. Johnson, *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942-1991* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 24-25.

¹⁷ Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 24-25.

¹⁸ Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 25.

Air Force commander reporting directly to Admiral McCain. The compromise left an Air Force component commander responsible for the training and administration of his forces but left operational control to the air commander on the island, who in turn reported to Admiral McCain.¹⁹ Harmon still had serious reservations about the wisdom of surrendering operational control of his air units to the Navy; however, he went along with the situation so maximum effort against the Japanese could be organized as soon as possible.²⁰

COMAIRSOLS

Shortly after the landings on Cactus, the code-name for Guadalcanal, Admiral McCain deferred his operational control of the joint air forces to a Marine island commander. McCain then focused on providing aircraft, crews, and supplies to the commander, known as Commander Air Forces Cactus (COMAIRCACUS). COMAIRCACUS directed combat operations with minimal interference from COMAIRSOPAC.²¹

As the campaign moved up the Solomon Islands, a new command structure would evolve from COMAIRCACUS that would set the standard for joint air operations. This new operational structure, called COMAIRSOLS, was unique, partly because the command position rotated among the services. In addition, its staff was a mixture of Army, Navy, Marine, and New Zealand officers, making it a true combined staff. This organization, and the men who led it, would reach a pinnacle for joint air operations, never again achieved until the Gulf War.

¹⁹ Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 26.

²⁰ J. Britt McCarley, “General Nathan Farragut Twining: The Making of a Disciple of American Strategic Air Power, 1897-1953,” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1989), 56.

²¹ Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 36.

CHAPTER 1

SOPAC LEADERSHIP

As is the case in most military organizations, the officers holding the position of COMAIRCACTUS and COMAIRSOLS worked for commanders. Senior South Pacific commanders set the organizational structure of COMAIRSOLS, influenced and supported its subordinate commanders, and established a joint mindset that permeated throughout the organization. This chapter briefly discusses the background of these senior officers, details the initial stages of organizing and planning operations, and provides an overview of the conflict itself. Along the way, these commanders established a joint team and set the stage for victories achieved by the air leaders on the Solomon Islands.

Initial Leadership

At the outset, the key South Pacific commanders were Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, Commander of South Pacific Forces (COMSOPAC), Vice Admiral John McCain, Commander of South Pacific Air Forces (COMAIRSOPAC), and Major General Millard Harmon, the Commanding General of South Pacific Forces (COMGENSOPAC). These individuals had the important tasks of planning, organizing, and providing guidance for initial operations.

Ghormley

Admiral King ordered Nimitz to hold already occupied territory in the Pacific, as well as prepare eventual assaults through the Solomons. King chose Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, a highly intellectual man with a reputation for caution, to command the South Pacific area under Nimitz. His assignment, as commander of the South Pacific Area and the South Pacific Air Force, united an administrative area command with an operational force command, placing Ghormley in a position to keep his

fingers on both logistics and fighting.¹ Unfortunately, Ghormley struggled in this effort. His impressive resume lacked significant combat or operational planning experiences, and his “book smarts” were not enough to lead forces in a theater that, if lost, could spell disaster for the Allies in the Pacific. His appointment as COMSOPAC proved to be one of Admiral King’s poorest choices.² Luckily, he had two outstanding subordinates with him in this effort whose initiative made up for Ghormley’s lack of leadership.

McCain

Admiral King appointed Rear Admiral John S. McCain as COMAIRSOPAC, who reported directly to Admiral Ghormley. A naval aviator who had a reputation as an action-oriented, visionary leader, McCain counter-balanced Ghormley’s passiveness.³ McCain officially became COMAIRSOPAC on 20 May 1942 and established his headquarters in Noumea, New Caledonia. He immediately recognized both the challenges and the opportunities for air power in the vast region, and set to work on the overall structure of the air organization.

Harmon

On July 7, 1942, Marshall named Major General Millard “Miff” Harmon the Commanding General of the U.S. Army Forces in the South Pacific Area (COMGENSOPAC). Harmon’s primary responsibilities were the administration and training of all U.S. ground and air troops in the South Pacific organization, supply and training of all Army bases, ground and air units in the South Pacific area. Marshall also instructed him to assist Ghormley in the preparation and execution of any plans dealing with the employment of Army forces.⁴

¹ Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980). Cited in Gilbert, 72.

² E.B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1977), 47.

³ Alton Keith Gilbert, *A Leader Born: The Life of Admiral John Sidney McCain, Pacific Carrier Commander* (Philadelphia, Pa: Casemate, 2006), 72.

⁴ Louis Morton. *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1962), 260.

Harmon's selection occurred as result of a meeting between Admiral King, Admiral Ghormley, General Marshall, and General Dwight Eisenhower. Harmon had all of the traits needed for an Army commander in the South Pacific theater, especially organizational skills. The Army had troops, aircraft squadrons, and installations scattered throughout the vast area, making shipping between those locations an absolute premium.⁵ In addition, Harmon's substantial joint background made him the ideal Army officer to serve in a naval-centric theater.

Air Organization

McCain recognized the strategic significance of the South Pacific and realized the critical nature of air power. Impressed by the ease at which the islands could be made impregnable with a minimal amount of air, McCain concluded, "Air among these interlocking islands, can in large measure, substitute for ships guns and infantry."⁶ However, he faced the challenge of accomplishing the mission with aviation assets scattered widely across the South Pacific and with multiple services and other Allied nations air assets to control.

McCain first faced the challenge of air asset organization. Within a month of taking command, he issued a plan titled, "Organization of Aircraft, South Pacific Forces." With this plan, he made a very important decision for the future air operations in the Solomon Islands Campaign. McCain realized the impractical problems of exercising command over widely dispersed aircraft under different services and nations conducting differing operations, all with significant communication difficulties. He therefore limited his duties to producing a general doctrine of force employment and specifying the types of operations he expected. McCain

⁵ Robert G. Novotny, "Tarmacs and Trenches, Lieutenant General Millard F. Harmon, Jr., USAAF." (Thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2007), 53.

⁶ Gilbert, *A Leader Born*, 76.

made local commanders responsible for operational implementation of his guidelines.⁷

Although Harmon received a pre-brief on this arrangement, he disagreed with McCain's command structure, especially its inefficiencies in the application of joint airpower. Harmon thought combat control of various units should be vested in respective services because each knew best how to employ its own forces.⁸ McCain, however, believed that his structure better achieved unity of effort. After meeting with Admiral Nimitz on his way to Noumea, Harmon expressed his concerns. Harmon "held strong reservations as to the wisdom of sacrificing operational control over the air units," Nimitz remembered.⁹ Harmon's loyalty, however, to his commanders and his professionalism as an officer prevented him from pursuing the matter further. Nimitz told McCain, "Harmon fully appreciates the fact that you are to continue to exercise operational control of all air components in the South Pacific. In my opinion, Harmon is a first rate selection for the job, and I feel sure that you will work harmoniously together."¹⁰

Pre-invasion

Success in the Solomon Islands relied heavily on the ability to operate as many ship and land-based aircraft as possible in support of ground operations. However, before Harmon's arrival, Ghormley was not sure he would have sufficient land-based aviation for the invasion.¹¹ Admiral McCain also recognized this problem, telling Ghormley, "The

⁷ Gilbert, *A Leader Born*, 76.

⁸ "Material to be Incorporated into Thirteenth Bomber Command Actuation History," File #705.161, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell, AFB, AL.

⁹ Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan August 1942 to July 1944* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 33.

¹⁰ Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific, to Rear Admiral John S. McCain, Commander, Air, South Pacific, letter, 27 July 1942, Admiral Nimitz Collection, Admiral's Letters – 1942, Series XIII, Early Records Collection, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC. Cited in Novotny, 60.

¹¹ Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, letter, 29 July 1942, Admiral Nimitz Collection, Admiral's Letters – 1942, Series XIII, Early Records Collection, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC. Cited in Novotny, 64.

Army apparently is taking no interest in this area. . . . Seemingly we are not going to get any planes and seemingly also a string will be tied to those we have. I suggest you work it up with the New Zealand government to make a strong bid for the acquisition, through Lend-Lease of 20 B-17s, 36 B-26s, 26 dive bombers, latest model, and 36 fighters, latest model.”¹² McCain’s lack of confidence in the Army and his willingness to seek assistance from other Allied governments typifies the friction between Army and Navy planners in the South Pacific.¹³

Fortunately, help was on the way.

Harmon’s Arrival

Harmon finally arrived after completing a theater assessment of forces and operations in the Fijis, New Caledonia, Efate, Espiritu Santo, and the Santa Cruz group. He also reviewed intelligence and maps of Guadalcanal. At each location, he examined the forces, port facilities, possible airfield locations, available work force, and radar sites. His inspection revealed a myriad of problems. Little infrastructure existed to support operations and Harmon’s air forces were in a sad state of readiness and lacked any new aircraft other than a handful of B-17s from the 11th Bombardment Group. In addition, the Army’s air forces included two fighter squadrons and two medium bombardment squadrons divided between Fiji and New Caledonia.¹⁴ Also, many of the airfields used by the Army Air Forces remained horribly unprepared and subjected to some of the harshest weather conditions on the planet.

Tackling the supply demands and acquiring aircraft for the operation gave Harmon another enormous challenge. Fortunately,

¹² Rear Admiral John S. McCain, Commander, Air, South Pacific, to Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, Commander, South Pacific, letter, 6 July 1942, Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley Papers, Early Records Collection, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC. Cited in Novotny, 64.

¹³ Novotny, “Tarmacs and Trenches,” 64.

¹⁴ “The Army in the South Pacific” with references by Millard F. Harmon, Jr., 6 Jun 1944, Marshall to Harmon, Letter of Instructions to the Commanding General, U.S. Army Forces in the South Pacific Area, 7 July 1942, in Millard F. Harmon, Jr. Papers, 705.04A, IRIS No. 0251243, AFHRA. Cited in Novotny, 57.

Harmon's background suited him for the task. His understanding of the Army Air Forces system and his recent stint as Chief of the Air Staff in Washington, DC, gave him unique insight into the tumultuous supply demands placed on the Army and potential inroads to turn the unfavorable conditions to the South Pacific's advantage.¹⁵ Both he and McCain devoted a significant amount of energy trying to get much-needed airpower assets for the upcoming invasion.

By the first week in August 1942, Harmon established a headquarters in Noumea.¹⁶ He felt it important to collocate with the other South Pacific air leadership. Ghormley's headquarters, responsible for all joint operations and planning, lacked an experienced joint air environment. Out of 103 officers, only three wore an Army uniform. Therefore, despite Harmon's limited operational role regarding air matters in the predominantly naval theater, his inputs were valuable.

Harmon and McCain further delineated command responsibilities. McCain and the joint commanders below him were responsible for outlining doctrine and determining the use of all air forces, but delegation of the training and preparation for the Army Air Force missions went to Harmon. Miff still wanted more authority, but withheld his criticisms and supported the mission as ordered.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Harmon stretched his authority to the limit. The actual details of his orders, restricting him to only administrative control over his forces, left room to play a far more active role in operations than his orders intended.¹⁸ He took advantage of this and set out to requisition as many new aircraft, personnel, and supplies for his theater as possible.¹⁹

¹⁵ Novotny, "Tarmacs and Trenches," 61.

¹⁶ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 33.

¹⁷ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 33.

¹⁸ Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 261.

¹⁹ Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 261.

Harmon procured much-needed land-based aviation, but it lacked a potent punch. Harmon's principal long-range strike aircraft, the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, was the only plane able to accomplish surface search missions and area reconnaissance because of its great range and defensive armament. Consequently, the Navy assigned the B-17s this nontraditional task. Harmon's medium range bombers, Martin B-26 Marauders stationed in the New Hebrides and Fiji Islands could not reach Guadalcanal and therefore had to be relegated to local island defense. Despite the insufficient air situation, Admiral Ghormley ordered the invasion of Guadalcanal to proceed on August 7, 1942.²⁰

Invasion

Initially, the Marines met little resistance establishing a beachhead and capturing the Japanese airfield, which they promptly renamed Henderson Field, to honor a Marine pilot and squadron commander who had died in the Battle of Midway. However, throughout the remainder of August the struggle intensified, making it nearly impossible to resupply the airfield by air. Therefore, forces on Guadalcanal relied on naval forces, whose efforts were likewise constrained by poor port facilities and the use of slow, unmaneuverable, flat bottom ships.²¹ These supply ships relied on protection from attacking Japanese aircraft by U.S. Navy surface ships and aircraft.

On August 8, less than 24 hours into the operation, the Japanese Imperial Navy scored a tremendous victory. That night, a Japanese naval task force entered the narrow protected water passage known as the "Slot," catching U.S. naval forces by surprise and forcing the U.S. Navy task force commander, Vice Admiral Frank Fletcher, to order a withdrawal. Several Allied ships were sunk, leaving the Marines ashore on Guadalcanal without critical supplies, causing a two-week delay in

²⁰ Novotny, "Tarmac and Trenches," 64.

²¹ Novotny, "Tarmac and Trenches," 65.

airfield completion.²² The Navy Seabees and Marine engineers began construction on the airfield using abandoned Japanese shovels and handcarts.²³

To defend against Japanese shore-based aircraft, U.S. forces needed a completed airstrip. Harmon believed that thus far, the Navy misunderstood the true nature of the operation. The Navy's poor prioritization of airfield construction equipment on the invasion barges revealed the Navy viewed the landings as an amphibious effort only, rather than as a means to establish strong land-based air operations.²⁴ Ghormley's late realization of this lesson was apparent, as three days after the disaster he wrote to Nimitz, "Surface ships cannot operate, especially in very restricted waters, where they are subject to attack by shore based aircraft."²⁵ Harmon argued that capturing the Lunga airstrip should have been the first priority. The lack of prioritization, combined with the stunning naval defeat, left the invasion force short on fuel, equipment, and supplies, and now time.²⁶

The Navy's logistical line depended heavily on modern ports, refueling ships and supply vessels. The notion of building an active land-based airfield was foreign to Navy planners, and the late addition of Harmon to the operational planning was unable to overcome the existing shortsightedness.

A great deal of the blame for these logistical problems falls on Admiral Ghormley. He failed to do address the logistical constraints inherent to the South Pacific. Ghormley wrote a letter to Nimitz on

²² Novotny, "Tarmacs and Trenches," 65.

²³ Carl K. Hixon *Guadalcanal: An American Story* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 48.

²⁴ John Miller, Jr., *United States Army in World War II. The War in the Pacific. Guadalcanal: The First Offensive* (Washington, DC: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1949), 85

²⁵ Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, Commander, South Pacific, to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific, letter, 11 August 1942, Admiral Nimitz Collection, Admiral's Letters – 1942, Series XIII, Early Records Collection, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC. Cited in Novotny, 66.

²⁶ Miller, *The War in the Pacific*, 81-85.

August 11 revealing his newfound but tardy understanding of the problem: “This island warfare is a tough nut. The shipping problem is difficult. We need big transport planes.”²⁷ Unfortunately, he took no action to improve the dire situation. General Nathan Twining, Harmon’s Chief of Staff, provided an unsettling story in a post-war interview when asked if Ghormley understood logistical concerns in the South Pacific. Twining said, “One day, we are out there talking and Ghormley turns to me and said, ‘you know, I’ve been thinking this over’ he said, ‘there is something to this logistic support thing, isn’t there?’” Twining felt it was an “unbelievable” admission by Ghormley.²⁸

Not until August 20 did the diligent efforts of McCain and Harmon finally result in getting 19 Marine fighters and 12 dive-bombers to Guadalcanal. This formed the initial “Cactus Air Force.”²⁹ Upon receipt of these planes, the assistant operations officer for the First Marine Division, Merrill Twining, both praised McCain and took a dig at Ghormley: “Working against the atmosphere of apathy and indecision that prevailed at COMSOPAC, the always effective and dedicated Admiral McCain had, with his unlimited initiative, somehow managed to open the gate.”³⁰

Air Operations on Guadalcanal

McCain correctly saw the Battle of Guadalcanal as a mutual assistance pact between the Cactus Air Force and the Marines. The Cactus Air Force defended the Marines by bombing Japanese reinforcements at sea, and the Marines defended the Cactus Air Force by

²⁷ Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, Commander, South Pacific, to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific, letter, 11 August 1942, Admiral Nimitz Collection, Admiral’s Letters – 1942, Series XIII, Early Records Collection, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC. Cited in Novotny, 67.

²⁸ General Nathan F. Twining, interview by Dr. Murray Green, 3 November 1967, transcript, Box 9, Addendum 19, The Murray Green Collection, US Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO. Cited in Novotny, 67.

²⁹ CACTUS was the code name for Guadalcanal.

³⁰ Merrill B. Twining and Neil G. Carey, *No Bended Knee: The Battle for Guadalcanal: the Memoir of Gen. Merrill B. Twining USMC (Ret.)* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1996), 84.

fighting off Japanese thrusts at Henderson Field. If either faltered, Guadalcanal was lost.³¹ To succeed, McCain aided the Marines on Guadalcanal by cobbling together his theater's sparse air assets. He managed to scrape together some Army air assets by getting 14 P-400s from the 67th Pursuit Squadron to Henderson Field by August 29. Although the first Army Air Force unit on Guadalcanal, the unit nonetheless fell under the operational control of the First Marine Aviation Wing, commanded by Brigadier General Roy Geiger.³²

Unlike Ghormley, who remained in relative safety aboard his command ship, McCain believed in witnessing operations first hand. On August 30, he flew to Guadalcanal to see attacks by enemy bombers and by enemy naval artillery. It made a big impression on him, so much so that he promised the ground commander, Marine General Alexander Vandergrift, the air force Vandergrift needed to finally, somehow secure the island. In addition, McCain showed tremendous leadership by taking every opportunity to boost morale among the troops and aircrews, telling them that the successful defense of the island would lead to the destruction of Japanese naval power in the Pacific.³³

McCain's comments to the troops were not empty words. The visit revealed to him the horrific intensity of the Guadalcanal fight. When he saw how much the Japanese dominated the night with ships and the day with bombers, he immediately sent bold messages to Ghormley, MacArthur, Nimitz, and King, letting them know the necessity of additional aircraft and crews. "The situation admits of no delay whatsoever" he told them, and if "Guadalcanal cannot be supplied," it "cannot be held." But, he confidently declared, with reinforcement the

³¹ Hixon *Guadalcanal*, 107.

³² Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 40-41.

³³ Gilbert, *A Leader Born*, 93.

island could become “a sinkhole for enemy airpower and can be consolidated, expanded, and exploited to the enemy’s mortal hurt.”³⁴

Despite McCain’s efforts, the situation on Guadalcanal continued to deteriorate in early September. On September 11, McCain and Turner flew into Guadalcanal to meet with Vandergrift to discuss the situation. They brought with them a situation appraisal from Ghormley, which said the increase in enemy forces signified a likely Japanese attempt to retake Guadalcanal within 10 days. It went on to detail U.S. Navy and Marine Corp weaknesses and concluded by stating Ghormley could no longer support Marines on Guadalcanal. Ghormley essentially gave up, leaving the three commanders to save Guadalcanal on their own. Fortunately, they devised a plan that changed Ghormley’s mind.³⁵

Meanwhile, back in D.C., Army Air Corps Chief General Hap Arnold was dealing with a tricky situation. Army Air Forces were in major conflicts in two theaters; in the European theater with an emphasis on daylight, precision bombing; and in the Pacific with an emphasis on airpower subordinated to support naval forces. The lack of major industry in the Pacific did not fit Arnold’s vision for the use of strategic bombers. Therefore, Arnold stood at a moral crossroads in Washington, DC.³⁶ He knew the future independence of the Air Force depended upon the type of warfare waged in Europe, not the Pacific. He also did not think victory hinged on the Pacific theater, and the senior political leaders he answered to felt the same way.

Harmon’s obligations, nevertheless, were in the Pacific, where he constantly emphasized the need for more assets dedicated to the Pacific theater. Harmon cared less about inter-service politics as long as the United States made progress in the war against the Japanese. Writing to Brigadier General Laurence Kuter, like Harmon a former ACTS instructor

³⁴ Samuel B. Griffith, *The Battle for Guadalcanal* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), 99-100.

³⁵ Hixon *Guadalcanal*, 92.

³⁶ Novotny, “Tarmacs and Trenches,” 71.

and now the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, Harmon urged Kuter to “tell Gen Arnold it won’t be long now before I am wearing ‘bell bottom trousers’ but nevertheless this is a job with a high degree of interest. Of course, it’s a bit tough at times not to be operating one’s bombers and to listen to a Navy chap talking about ‘my B-17s,’ but everything and anything goes as long as we lick the Jap.”³⁷

Harmon did not give up in his requests to Arnold. As one of a handful of influential Army Air Force senior officers in 1942, Harmon’s observations, recommendations, and priorities carried significant meaning. Therefore, Arnold chose to visit the South Pacific to talk to the South Pacific leaders and see the situation first hand. The visit took place on board the *Argonne*, Ghormley’s flagship in Noumea Harbor. Nimitz also attended the meeting. Arnold almost immediately voiced his displeasure at how things were going in the theater, and he verbally attacked the senior Navy officers, accusing them of failing to fight.

There was one positive outcome from the meeting. Although Arnold did not make any friends, Nimitz and Arnold did come to the same conclusion on one crucial issue: Ghormley was not fit for this command. Ghormley lacked confidence and seemed crushed by the burden of work and nervous strain.³⁸ Nimitz asked Ghormley a number of loaded questions regarding the misuse of air, land, and sea forces in the area, to which Ghormley gave no satisfactory answers. To make matters worse, Nimitz discovered that Ghormley, the admiral responsible for winning the Battle of Guadalcanal, had never set foot on the island.³⁹

³⁷ Notes from Murray Green collection, *AAF Operates Under Navy Command in South Pacific – Sept 1942*, reference Major General M.F. Harmon to Brigadier General L.S. Kuter, letter, 11 September 1942, L/C Box 88, 8.59, The Murray Green Collection, US Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO. Cited in Novotny, 72.

³⁸ Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 209.

³⁹ Spector, *Eagle against the Sun*, 209.

Nimitz knew what he had to do. If Ghormley did not want this fight, Nimitz knew who did.⁴⁰

Arnold's visit proved detrimental to inter-service relationships in the South Pacific. It fell to Harmon to repair these relations after his air boss left. Harmon's loyalty to his chain of command in theater paid tremendous dividends in Nimitz and Ghormley's eyes. However, it came at a price. In a matter of weeks, Harmon found himself inside the inner ring of the Navy's trusted circle and thus outside of Arnold's for the next several months.⁴¹

Back on Guadalcanal, the situation continued to deteriorate. The Japanese reinforced the island in October. Henderson Field suffered relentless bombardment, while the pilots of the Cactus Air Force tried to support Marines and soldiers further inland. Shockingly, despite this struggle, Admiral Ghormley pushed for the strategically irrelevant invasion of the neighboring island of Ndeni. The capture of Ndeni had been a part of the initial campaign design for the Solomons; but with the survival of Henderson Field in doubt, Harmon could not believe Ghormley held fast to Ndeni instead of reinforcing ongoing efforts at Guadalcanal.⁴² Writing to Ghormley on October 6, Harmon outlined his objections to the occupation of Ndeni. From a military viewpoint the occupation of Ndeni, at the time, was a poor use of forces. Moreover, while the rationale for the occupation of Ndeni was valid before, efforts against the island now represented a "diversion from the main effort and dispersion of force[s]."⁴³ Harmon was convinced Guadalcanal could still be lost and he wrote the situation was "continuingly critical."⁴³

⁴⁰ Hixon, *Guadalcanal*, 133.

⁴¹ Novotny, "Tarmacs and Trenches," 75.

⁴² Novotny, "Tarmacs and Trenches," 76.

⁴³ Major General M.F. Harmon, Commanding General, United States Army Forces in the South Pacific Area, to Vice Admiral R.L. Ghormley, Commander, South Pacific, letter, 6 October 1942, in Millard F. Harmon, Jr. Papers, 705.04A, IRIS No. 0251243, AFHRA. Cited in Novotny, 61.

On the night of October 12 and into the next morning, the Japanese launched an intense air, ground and naval bombardment of the American positions on Henderson Field. Without new reinforcements, the Americans could not hold the vital airstrip. Harmon even sent messages to General Marshall in Washington, DC explaining the bleak situation, telling Marshall: “the position Cactus untenable without more naval surface support. Ghormley has not yet announced definite line of action he proposes pursue in light [of the] developments [of the] past week.”⁴⁴

With few options available, Harmon scraped together the best aircraft he had and argued for more reinforcements. Admiral Ghormley failed to act, removing all doubt as to his incompetence. Fortunately, in what was the most active time in Cactus Air Force history, joint airpower kept the Japanese navy and air forces from providing coordinated support to its land forces during the enemy ground assault.⁴⁵

Changing of the Guard

By the middle of October, Nimitz had lost complete confidence in Admiral Ghormley, finally relieving him of his duties on October 18. That day, Admiral William Halsey arrived at Noumea Harbor, thinking he was there to take over a task force under Admiral Ghormley. As he headed to the flagship, he was handed an envelope marked “secret.” Inside was an order from Nimitz stating, “You will take command of the South Pacific Area and South Pacific Forces immediately.”⁴⁶ He was an outstanding choice for the job. Halsey, coupled with Gen Harmon and Admiral Fitch, set the foundation for the trademark example of joint air operations for the next 40 years.

⁴⁴Major General M.F. Harmon, Commanding General, United States Army Forces in the South Pacific Area, to General G.C. Marshall, Chief of Staff, War Department, letter, 17 October 1942, Box 187, in The Papers of Henry H. Arnold, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Cited in Novotny, 78.

⁴⁵ J. Miller, *The War in the Pacific*, 142.

⁴⁶ Hixon, *Guadalcanal*, 150.

Admiral McCain was also relieved, not because of performance, but because it was time for him to rotate out. McCain left Guadalcanal with a series of sincere goodbyes to Vandergrift, Geiger, and Harmon, complimenting the Marines and Army for their valiant action. McCain had been refreshingly joint minded, despite service rivalries that in World War II permeated throughout the highest levels of military leadership. He had a lasting respect for Marine aviation, which the Marines likewise reciprocated. He also provided praise to the Army Air Forces, telling Harmon that the Army pilots were brave, despite flying the aerodynamically limited P-400.⁴⁷ He also praised the B-17 and its crews: “I do not believe we are realizing the full potentialities of that magnificent plane and those magnificent pilots.”⁴⁸

Halsey and the New Team SOPAC

Good friends with Admiral Ghormley, Halsey felt “astonishment, apprehension, and regret” Upon learning the surprising news that he would be the new COMSOPAC.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it did not take him long to determine why Nimitz made the decision. On his first day of duty, Halsey listened to Ghormley lay out the ground situation. After only a few minutes, Halsey realized neither Ghormley nor this staff “could give him a firsthand description of the situation.”⁵⁰

Halsey, known for his aggressive style of command and his character, was a sharp contrast to the incompetent Ghormley. Halsey had earned respect across the Fleet as a commander, and the announcement of his taking command was received on board the ships

⁴⁷ Gilbert, *A Leader Born*, 99.

⁴⁸ Rear Admiral John S. McCain, Commander, South Pacific Air Forces South Pacific, to Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch and Major General Millard F. Harmon, Jr., Commanding General, United States Army Forces in the South Pacific Area, letter, 19 September 1942, File #705.161, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁴⁹ William L. McGee and Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Solomons Campaigns, 1942-1943, from Guadalcanal to Bougainville: Pacific War Turning Point* (Santa Barbara, CA: BMC Publications, 2002), 133.

⁵⁰ Potter, *Nimitz*, 198.

of the South Pacific with cheers and rejoicing.⁵¹ Despite not becoming an aviator until late in his career, Halsey greatly appreciated the need for airpower of all kinds.⁵²

Fitch

On September 21, Admiral Aubrey Fitch relieved McCain. A battle-hardened veteran, Fitch served as a carrier group commander in the Battle of the Coral Sea. He had a reputation as a quick thinker and had saved the lives of 2700 seamen on the carrier *Enterprise* by accurately surveying its battle damage and ordering evacuation. For the new COMAIRSOPAC, these skills proved vital. Fitch improvised when the situation on Guadalcanal was bleak on Oct 14. The Japanese cruisers approached through the darkness and Fitch had no planes or gasoline available to stop them. Nine remaining spare SDBs had no pilots to fly them. Fitch stepped in and had VMF-212 furnish the pilots to ferry spares to Guadalcanal and then addressed the gas problem by organizing all available Army and Marine transport aircraft in the area to ferry drums of fuel and push as many planes as possible to the island.⁵³ The new commander completed the reinforcement by Nov 12, just in time for the epic battle to begin the next day.⁵⁴ The situation was definitely improving under Halsey and Fitch's command.

Turning the Tide

Halsey's first order of business was to meet with his senior commanders, including Vandergrift and Harmon. Vandergrift explained the deplorable situation, outlining the toll taken by combat losses and ravages of disease, and pleaded for more support if he was to hold out. Leaving no doubts, Halsey heard replied, "I promise to get you everything

⁵¹ McGee and Morison, *The Solomons Campaigns*, 133-134.

⁵² Eric M. Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky: The Air War in the South Pacific* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 382.

⁵³ J. Miller, *The War in the Pacific*, 123.

⁵⁴ J. Miller, *The War in the Pacific*, 181.

I have.”⁵⁵ Halsey brought a never-say-die attitude to his command that spread throughout the entire South Pacific.

Halsey then made it a point to get off the *ARGONNE* and seek a building large enough to hold the staffs of his subordinate components. He constantly interacted with his air leaders and his optimism bled throughout the South Pacific. These traits made Halsey among the very best in gaining respect and gave him legendary status among his fighting men. His leadership gave the Americans on Guadalcanal an unusually savage determination to succeed.⁵⁶ On November 1, Harmon wrote Marshall to tell him that Halsey had improved morale and that the situation on Guadalcanal was improving. Harmon wrote: “I feel that the Jap can win now in the Solomons only by bold aggressive action of heavily superior forces.” He further commented, “Halsey has shown aggressiveness and ingenuity. All heads are high here and will so remain.”⁵⁷

Harmon also showed ingenuity. One important innovation came when Halsey confronted Harmon about the poor results from high-altitude bombing. Harmon knew something had to be done, and told him he would correct the problem. Harmon responded by improving counter-sea efforts by implementing new tactics with his medium bomber forces. He proposed using the skip-bombing tactics that General George Kenney employed. Kenny had found that skip-bombing avoided early detection, improved fighter defense, and increased bomb hits.⁵⁸ McCain had previously written about this development, saying the answer to Japanese surface shipping seems “to be the low altitude skip

⁵⁵ Potter, *Nimitz*, 199.

⁵⁶ Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky*, 377.

⁵⁷ Major General M.F. Harmon, Commanding General, United States Army Forces in the South Pacific Area, to General G.C. Marshall, Chief of Staff, War Department, letter, 1 November 1942, courtesy Helen Harmon Nazzaro personal collection, in the author’s collection. Cited in Novotny, 81.

⁵⁸ Thomas E. Griffith, *MacArthur’s Airman: General George C. Kenney and the War in the Southwest Pacific* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 82.

bombing method now being tried out under General Harmon.”⁵⁹ Harmon ordered new crews to train on skip bombing tactics and by December, the synergistic effects of aggressive naval surface action with improvements in Harmon’s bombers all but “isolated the Japanese on Guadalcanal.⁶⁰

Harmon made other adjustments as well. He began rotating his combat crews. He saw his flight crews suffering combat fatigue, in particular the bombardment units flying daily patrols and the pilots and support personnel on Henderson Field. In an effort to provide some rest for his tired aviators, Harmon sent multiple crews in regular intervals for rest periods to Auckland, New Zealand. This brought full rehabilitation to most of the crews, who could then return to combat rested and ready.⁶¹ Not much later, Harmon improved the defenses of his precious B-17s by adding two fifty caliber guns in the nose and one in the radio area of the airplane.⁶²

The air situation on Guadalcanal improved dramatically in just over a month. On October 26, when the Japanese came dangerously close to destroying American air strength on Guadalcanal, Henderson Field had 29 operational aircraft. By November 30, the airfield contained 188 aircraft. In addition, improved runway conditions now allowed for B-17 operations. During this period, Harmon took the opportunity to readdress the issue of the temporarily postponed Ndeni operation. After making his case, Halsey, unlike Ghormley, accepted his advice and cancelled the operation. Halsey then redirected the forces to Guadalcanal as much needed reinforcements.⁶³ This proved essential, as what was

⁵⁹ Rear Admiral John S. McCain, Commander, South Pacific Air Forces South Pacific, to Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch and Major General Millard F. Harmon, Jr., Commanding General, United States Army Forces in the South Pacific Area, letter, 19 September 1942, File #705.161, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁶⁰ Novotny, “Tarmacs and Trenches,” 81.

⁶¹ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 234-235.

⁶² Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 62.

⁶³ J. Miller, *The War in the Pacific*, 174.

originally thought would be light resistance by the Japanese turned into a massive battle. The CACTUS Air Force provided heroic air support during the fight, the joint team serving as a power force multiplier to ground units.⁶⁴ This massive battle lasted until the Americans forced the Japanese off Guadalcanal on February 8.

As operations progressed in the Solomons, Harmon again argued to recapture operational control of Army aircraft from the Navy. He believed no one should build an air force, train it, and supply it without influence over its operational control. Harmon therefore argued for the creation of a new organization to manage South Pacific Army air forces. Harmon submitted the plan to Arnold, and on December 5, Marshall made it official by designating the Thirteenth Air Force. Harmon appointed his best ranking subordinate, Brigadier General Nathan Twining, to be its first commander.⁶⁵ Although the new organization did not allow for full operational control of Army Air Force aircraft, it did allow for administrative control, and more influence on operational matters. To ensure this influence, Harmon established the headquarters on Espiritu Santo, near Rear Admiral Fitch.⁶⁶

Harmon's impact through the end of the Guadalcanal campaign was evident. He successfully navigated through service tensions in a Navy theater, and overcame a lack of resources due to the "Germany first" strategy in Washington D.C. Even after Arnold's visit, one that nearly destroyed the excellent relationships Harmon had built, the Navy continued to rely on Harmon's expertise, and he continued to participate with Halsey in planning the march up the island chain. Although Japanese strength in the Solomons had taken a tremendous blow with the loss of Guadalcanal, the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul remained, with a number of smaller forces between it and Guadalcanal. With naval

⁶⁴ Novotny, "Tarmacs and Trenches," 85.

⁶⁵ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 70.

⁶⁶ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 71.

carrier strength waning, the two leaders knew the range of the land-based fighter aircraft ultimately determined their next move.⁶⁷

On February 3, he received his promotion to lieutenant general. During the previous seven months, Harmon served as a two-star general, while Kenney, the air commander in the Southwest Pacific, had been a three-star general for nearly a year. It is unclear if the Army Air Forces delayed Harmon's promotion, but it is clear Admiral Halsey pushed for it through Admiral Nimitz.⁶⁸ In fact, Halsey not only officiated Harmon's promotion, but also gave him his personal three-star insignia for his uniform.⁶⁹

Beyond Guadalcanal

Despite evicting the Japanese from Guadalcanal, theater commanders understood that only a tremendous effort would achieve the objective of removing the enemy from all of the Solomons and Rabaul.⁷⁰ Bomber operations and air superiority were critical for operations, but in order to provide the air power, they needed to establish airfields as they pushed north toward that goal. First, an airfield on the Russells was necessary to provide additional air support for the New Georgia invasion. An airfield on New Georgia was necessary to reach Bougainville with sufficient airpower. Finally, taking Bougainville was necessary to reach Rabaul.

The push north began on February 21, when ground forces initiated the invasion of the Russells. There was little resistance, allowing American engineers to immediately begin constructing two airfields. On April 15, the first airfield was complete and ready to support operations against New Georgia.⁷¹ Harmon's prioritization of

⁶⁷ "The Army in the South Pacific," 7 July 1942, in Millard F. Harmon, Jr. Papers, 705.04A, IRIS No. 0251243, AFHRA, 7. Cited in Novotny, 90.

⁶⁸ Novotny, "Tarmacs and Trenches," 88.

⁶⁹ Unknown newspaper clipping from Helen Harmon Nazzaro collection dated 17 February 1943, "Harmon gets Promotion." Cited in Novotny, 88.

⁷⁰ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 204.

⁷¹ J. Miller, *The War in the Pacific*, 356.

airfield equipment in the early stages was essential to its timely completion. With the airfield complete, Halsey accomplished his objective of securing a permanent base within reach of the major Japanese airstrip at Munda Point on New Georgia, which was expected to be much more difficult than the Russell Islands operation.⁷²

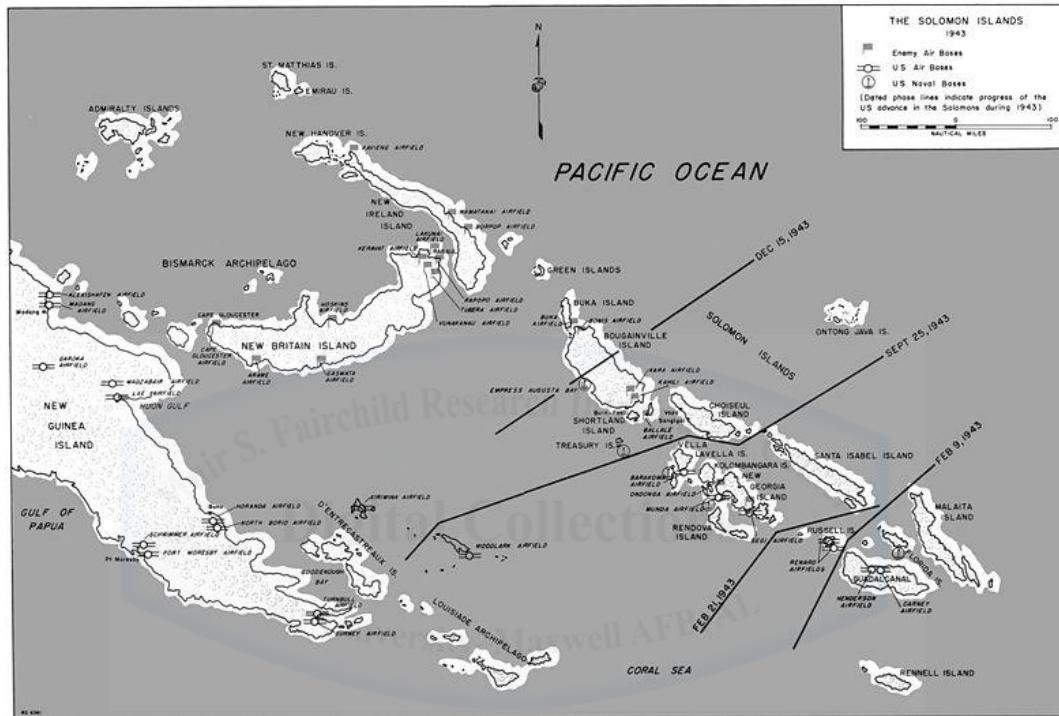


Figure 2: Solomon Islands Timeline.

Source: <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-C-NSol/index.html>

While planning this operation, Harmon took the opportunity to readdress the command structure for the air campaign. Harmon had insisted from the beginning of the SOPAC fighting, on principles of unity of command, that there had been a dilution of the previously agreed upon administrative control of his forces, especially in regards to the Thirteenth Air Force. This was mostly due to the lack of understanding

⁷² Novotny, "Tarmac and Trenches," 91.

of subordinate commanders and staff officers.⁷³ The Thirteenth Air Force was distinctly part of his command, and he felt it important to retain direct responsibility for and control of all matters affecting administration, supply, movement and training. He also insisted on an observance of command principles and doctrines and techniques of employment. He made his views known to Admiral Halsey, who showed a great deal of trust in his air leaders and said he would abide by any decision reached by Admiral Fitch and General Harmon. In a two-day conference, Harmon and Fitch outlined the command roles and responsibilities. Halsey concurred with their recommendations.⁷⁴

Halsey, as was his pattern though the SOPAC campaign, maintained overall command and exercised direct control of all naval forces. Harmon remained in his subordinate role to Halsey and ensured all Army forces received the supplies and training necessary. Air operations, including Navy, Marine, Army and New Zealand assets, went to Admiral Fitch, who consulted with the Thirteenth Air Force commander, Major General Twining. Operational and general supervision over air the Forward Area went to a commander known as COMAIRSOLS was, on Admiral Fitch's recommendation, appointed by Admiral Halsey.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Halsey, Harmon, McCain, and Fitch set the stage for a unique joint air organization in the Solomon Islands Campaign, and together provided the leadership and guidance to turn the tide in the Pacific War. Success at Guadalcanal was not possible without these commanders in the South Pacific and their ability to achieve a high level of unity of effort, establish strong relationships, and overcome service individualism to accomplish the mission. General Hubert Harmon, who was the last Army Air Force

⁷³ Lt Gen Millard F. Harmon, "Excerpts From The Army in the South Pacific," File #750.04-64, p 5., Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁷⁴ Lt Gen Millard F. Harmon, "Excerpts From The Army in the South Pacific," 5.

⁷⁵ Lt Gen Millard F. Harmon, "Excerpts From The Army in the South Pacific," 5.

COMAIRSOLS, paid a great and fitting compliment to these leaders. You "could search a lifetime," he remembered, "and not find a finer trio than he [Fitch], Miff, and Admiral H[alsey]."⁷⁶

At the core of the Solomon Islands Campaign, however, were the subordinate air commanders. The men of COMAIRCACTUS and COMAIRSOLS carried the operational burden of the campaign, starting in September 1942, when a Marine became the first air commander.



⁷⁶ Phillip S. Meilinger, *Hubert R. Harmon: Airman, Officer, Father of the Air Force Academy* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Group, 2009), 131.

CHAPTER 2

COMAIRCACTUS - General Roy S. Geiger

On September 3, Brigadier General Roy Geiger, a burly, 57 year old, white-haired veteran of the Marine Corps, first stepped foot on Guadalcanal.¹ He was assigned this duty only two weeks prior in San Diego, when General Rowell, Commander, Marine Air Wings, Pacific, handed him orders directing him to report to COMSOPAC and to COMAIRSOPAC. The instruction stated he was to “have general command of all Marine Corps aircraft or other such organizations as may be placed at your disposal by higher authority.” With these vague instructions, General Geiger became the first COMAIRCACTUS.

General Geiger had an illustrious background. He was the fifth designated Marine Aviator, earning his wings in June of 1917, and then served as a squadron commander in the First Marine Aviation Force in World War I, where he flew combat sorties and earned his first Navy Cross. In the interwar years, he served in multiple command billets, including head of Marine Aviation, and performed with distinction as a student at the Army Command and General Staff School and the Army and Navy War Colleges.² Despite his unique and impressive background, nothing could entirely prepare him for the duty of COMAIRCACTUS. The fate of the Cactus Air Force and 19,000 Marines rested on his shoulders.³

Geiger arrived at Guadalcanal with little knowledge of the actual conditions confronting him, other than sketchy intelligence reports. He was shocked at the stark conditions at CACTUS.⁴ The Cactus Air Force existed under the most primitive of operating conditions and a desperate

¹ Carl K. Hixon *Guadalcanal: An American Story* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 110.

² James B. Wellons, “General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander,” (Thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2007), VI.

³ Thomas Guy Miller, *The Cactus Air Force* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 67.

⁴ Wellons, “General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander.” 79.

shortage of personnel. Food was prepared over open fires, while troops rarely had the chance to wash clothes and bathe themselves in the Lunga River and almost everyone kept their clothes on.⁵ At a glance, Geiger immediately realized the necessity of restoring some semblance of order. He could clearly see his aviators and ground crews quickly approaching complete exhaustion. However, he could not show sympathy and coddle these warriors. He expected their full commitment, because without these pilots, Guadalcanal was lost.

He restored morale by displaying his fighting spirit and leading by example. For instance, after hearing complaints from the pilots about the conditions of the runway, Geiger--57 years old and 12 years past the allowed age to fly solo--walked to the first flyable and fueled SDB he spotted. He hopped in, taxied, dodged the many potholes, and took off from the damaged runway. He then flew over to a defended Japanese encampment, and dropped a 1,000-pound bomb on it, returned safely to Henderson, and parked his aircraft in its initial spot.⁶ Without showing the slightest trace of emotion, he looked at the group of aviators that gathered around and said, "From here on it's up to you." In addition to boosting morale, this showed his men he expected nothing from them he was not first willing to do himself.⁷ This charismatic persona immediately paid dividends in restoring confidence to his flight personnel. Geiger gave his men the impression he knew who the enemy was, he knew what he needed to do, and he was not leaving until the job

⁵ Guadalcanal Operations Summary, September 1942. Box #10, Folder #142, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps, Quantico, VA.

⁶ Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 99-100. This 1.2 hour flight is confirmed in Geiger's personal log book, Box #9, Folder #132. It was the only flight he logged on Guadalcanal other than his arrival. Additionally, the weapons release was confirmed in a MAG-23 after action report from CO to CNO, dated October 6, 1942, "1130: 1 SBD piloted by Major General Geiger dropped 1 - 1000# bomb." Folder #88, Box #5, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps, Quantico, VA.

⁷ Roger Willock, *Unaccustomed to Fear, A Biography of the Late General Roy E. Geiger*, U.S.M.C. (Quantico, Va: Marine Corps Association, 1983), 216.

was finished.⁸ With “The Old Man” in town, the COMAIRCACTUS pilots believed they could prevail in the end, even though they knew the worst was yet to come.⁹

Geiger’s initial command and control structure was ad hoc. He had operational control over all of the aircraft, but did not have time to organize it in an effective manner. He commanded a fluctuating number of airplanes, varying in type and service. He passed orders to individual squadron commanders to relay to the aircrew, making integration throughout COMAIRCACTUS difficult. Pilots from different squadrons operated together because it was impossible to operate as units due to the availability of aircraft on a given day.¹⁰

One of Geiger’s first tasks was to set up his headquarters. He could have established it on a rear echelon island, such as the relative comfort of Espritu Santo, but he stayed on the Guadalcanal to lead from the front, and instead sent staff officers back to liaison with COMAIRSOPAC. Geiger chose to locate his operational headquarters in a Japanese-built wooden structure known as the “Pagoda,” on the western end of the main runway.¹¹

In the Pagoda, staff briefed and debriefed pilots, evaluated coastwatcher sightings, and issued orders for Cactus Air Force missions. The atmosphere surrounding the Pagoda was at all times one of extreme urgency. Pilots and gunners hustled to get into the air without waiting for the rest of their unit, Cactus dive bombers and fighters arrived and departed at all hours with little regard for weather or runway conditions, and ground crews gassed and rearmed returning planes with remarkable speed to get them back into the air.¹²

⁸ Wellons, “General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander.” 78.

⁹ Willock, *Unaccustomed to Fear*, 209.

¹⁰ Guadalcanal Operations Summary, September, 1942. Box #10, Folder #142, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps, Quantico, VA.

¹¹ Report of Fighter Direction at Cactus, 2 Oct 1942. Box #10, Folder #142, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps, Quantico, VA.

¹² Hixon *Guadalcanal*, 110.

Geiger quickly realized the current defensive posture was not sufficient to hold the island and decided it was time to go on the offensive.¹³ He immediately threw every plane he had into the battles above Henderson.¹⁴ He ordered his planes to attack any Japanese supply barges they could spot. Although the initial results were only the sinking of one barge, they killed more than one-half of the Japanese infantrymen on the barges during their strafing attacks.¹⁵ The additional benefit was that the threat of airpower caused the Japanese to decrease the use of slower transports and barges, and switch to dropping off smaller amounts of supplies from destroyers at night.¹⁶

This offensive projection of air power, not from a carrier, nor in direct support of troops, was an unusual employment of air forces for a Marine commander, and may have influenced his view of an appropriate service structure. Before the war, Geiger rejected the idea of an independent air force. When the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations requested Geiger's opinion regarding the question of establishing an Independent Air Service, he responded with, "I do not believe that anyone claims that Aviation acting alone is able successfully to combat and to defeat an Army or a Fleet." He then said that a separate service would be unsound.¹⁷ Later, after his experience as a joint air commander at Guadalcanal, Geiger codified his reformed view in a letter to Retired Admiral Harry Yarnell, head of a Special Section in the Office of Chief of Naval Operations. Yarnell asked Geiger for his opinion on the

¹³ Jeff D. Philippart, *The Expeditionary Airfield As a Center of Gravity: Henderson Field During the Guadalcanal Campaign (August 1942-February 1943)* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala: Air University Press, 2004), 12.

¹⁴ Alton Keith Gilbert, *A Leader Born: The Life of Admiral John Sidney McCain, Pacific Carrier Commander* (Philadelphia, Pa: Casemate, 2006), 94.

¹⁵ Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 76.

¹⁶ Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal* (New York: Random House, 1990), 199. Cited in Philippart, 12.

¹⁷ Navy Department, Office of Naval Operations, Washington, to Captain Geiger, letter, 15 December 1919. Subject: A Separate Air Force. Folder #15, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. Cited in Wellons, 33.

appropriate status for aviation in U.S. military organizations. Geiger's response was not only surprising, considering his background, but also foreshadows many of the coming changes in the organization of air forces. His comments included the following:

The Navy must retain control of its aircraft...Whether or not we want to admit it, aircraft has revolutionized the Navy.

There should be a Department of Air on an equal footing with the War and Navy Department...

At times it will be necessary for the Air Force to operate with the Army, with the Navy, or both with the Army and Navy, and at still other times it may function independently. There appears no good reason why such an Air Force should belong to the Army any more than the Navy. The development of the Air Force should not be retarded by prejudices of either of the older service, as has been the case in the development of the Army and Navy Air Services in the past. It should be free to develop under the guidance of aviators...

The past and present sniping against Naval aviation can be avoided by: Stop building up a land based Naval Air Striking Force. Restrict such forces to that assigned to the Marine Corps, which should be no larger than sufficient aircraft to support Marine Corps troops...

Naval officers conduct air operation afloat. There are too many high ranking Naval aviation officers ashore...

Each of the three components, Army, Navy, and Air is of sufficient importance to have a Cabinet member at its head, as each has major problems unknown to the other. It is appreciated that the services have to be coordinated. In many operations they fight as a team. This coordination can be brought out by a Joint General Staff. Provision forth training of suitable command and staff officers should be made by the establishment of a Joint War College and by a free exchange of officers between the three services.¹⁸

Fighting for Survival

¹⁸ General Roy S. Geiger to Retired Admiral Harry Yarnell, August, 1943. Box 10, Folder 142, PC 311. Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps, Quantico, VA.

¹⁸ Willock, *Unaccustomed to Fear*, 216.

Despite Geiger's effort and vigor, the situation worsened. The Cactus Air Force won the tactical battles, but the sheer numbers of Japanese aircraft caused their numbers to atrophy. After a fierce battle on September 11, the two Marine squadrons were down to 11 flyable aircraft. Meanwhile, the Japanese had 40 fighters capable of reaching Guadalcanal from Rabaul.¹⁹ To make matters worse, Vandegrift informed Geiger that Admiral Turner was unable to provide naval support during a suspected upcoming Japanese assault. Furthermore, Vandegrift stated, "If the time comes when we no longer can hold the perimeter I expect you to fly out your planes." Geiger's response was typical of him: "Archer, if we can't use the planes back in the hills we'll fly them out. But whatever happens, I'm staying here with you."²⁰ With this matter settled, Geiger submitted an emergency request to McCain for all available aircraft to assist in the defense of Guadalcanal, gaining 24 F4Fs from the injured carrier, *Saratoga*, and 12 other aircraft from Espiritu Santo. These planes gave a much-needed boost to the Cactus Air Force's sagging morale.²¹

Over the next few days, the fierce ground battle kept the Cactus Air Force busy supporting Marine riflemen in their fierce struggle against Japanese infantry. These Marines reciprocated by defending the airfield and the Cactus Air Force. In addition to the ground battle, the Japanese renewed their naval and aerial shelling of Henderson Field. These attacks caused significant combat losses to the Cactus Air Force, which also suffered losses from operational problems at an even greater rate, a reflection of pilot fatigue and airfield conditions.²² However, for the time being, they had survived another Japanese onslaught, and Vandegrift was impressed with Geiger's fortitude. Vandegrift praised the Marine air

¹⁹ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 84.

²⁰ Alexander A. Vandegrift (as told to Robert B. Asprey), *Once a Marine* (New York: Norton & Co. 1964), 153-154.

²¹ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 85.

²² Wellons, "General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander." 83.

commander: “Geiger worked miracles with his planes, asking and receiving more than we possibly could expect from our fliers.”²³

Command and Control

In early October, because of the relative lull in combat operations, Geiger was finally able to refine his command and control structure. The new structure led to a more effective employment of forces. Discarding traditional resistance to integration between services and squadrons, Geiger reorganized his combined air force along “type” lines, separating planes into groups of one type, used for the same purpose, under a single Group Commander. Among these, Geiger created Strike Command, under which all dive-bombers with missions of search and attack, as well as Fighter Command, which had the multiple tasks of furnishing escort to strike command, shooting down any Japanese fighters or bombers, providing combat air patrol over the local area, low level strafing, and ground support. Geiger continued to exercise full responsibility for the combined combat performance of the new commands, and now had an organization with a command relationship designed to fit the operation.²⁴ Also, the majority of the aircrews had no problem with the organization, because the majority usually flew not knowing whether their wingman was Marine, Navy, or Army, nor did they care.²⁵ He retained the structure of squadron, groups and wing commands for administrative purposes, but the new system permitted much greater efficiency for operational command and control. In time, this system became the model for future operations on the island and other Marine operations in the Pacific theater.²⁶ The reorganization was just in time, because the situation on Guadalcanal was about to reach its highest crisis point.

²³ Vandegrift, *Once a Marine*, 163.

²⁴ Willock, *Unaccustomed to Fear*, 218.

²⁵ Jeter A. Isley and Philip A. Crowl, *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious Warfare* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1951), 146. Cited in Wellons, 58.

²⁶ Willock, *Unaccustomed to Fear*, 219.

Three Days of Hell

From October 13-15, the Japanese air and land forces mounted a full-scale assault on Henderson Field, inflicting one of the heaviest air and naval bombardments against American forces during World War II.²⁷ The entire strength of the Japanese Eleventh Air Fleet bombed Henderson Field with considerable accuracy, significantly damaging the runway and setting fire to 5,000 gallons of gasoline.²⁸ In addition, that evening, Japanese battleships rained artillery onto the field. The situation was a living nightmare for all on the ground. Many artillery bombardments of the war would be longer, but few provided such a concentration of huge guns on so small a target. In an hour, the gasoline dump was on fire, parked planes were ablaze all over the field, and an ammunition depot was going up in smoke.²⁹

Early in the morning on the 14th, Geiger and his staff emerged from a defensive trench to find a wrath of destruction. Only five SDBs were operational and virtually all of his *Wildcats* were damaged or destroyed.³⁰ The radio station was demolished, the Pagoda badly damaged, and 41 officers and men were killed, included the commanding officer, executive officer, a flight leader, and two other pilots of a Marine Scouting Unit.³¹

Geiger had some quick decisions to make, as the attack wiped out the island's offensive power. He needed to do everything in his power to reduce losses and deceive the enemy. His first decision was to bulldoze "The Pagoda," which provided too convenient of a target for the Japanese. He moved his Command Post to the secondary airfield known as the "Cow Pasture," outside of artillery range. In addition, wrecked planes from the bone yard were lined up wing to wing as inviting targets for

²⁷ Wellons, "General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander." 86.

²⁸ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 117.

²⁹ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 118.

³⁰ Samuel B. Griffith, *The Battle for Guadalcanal* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), 153.

³¹ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 119.

Japanese pilots to waste their ammunition.³² Next, he had to address the fuel situation, because virtually all of the aviation gasoline went up in flames. There was a desperate search for fuel supplies and Geiger's men resorted to draining gas tanks from wrecks in order to provision the few working aircraft. He also submitted emergency requests for fuel resupplies, which incoming transport planes and escort ships delivered to CACTUS.

Another major problem, once again, was aircraft availability. Of the 39 SDBs operational on October 13, only seven were flyable the next morning. In addition, all the TBFs were out of commission and only two P-39s and four P-400s remained mission capable. With a major Japanese offensive imminent, the Cactus Air Force had a meager seven dive-bombers to oppose it.³³ Geiger ordered his crews to get as many airplanes as possible into flyable condition. Suffering under the artillery barrage was difficult enough, but he knew he had to provide air defense for Vandegrift's Marines to have a chance against the Japanese.

To make matters worse, eight transports and 10 destroyers were spotted heading toward the island. The safe passage of this force was the whole object of Imperial Japanese Navy Fleet Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's huge operation, which planned to bombard Henderson and bring massive reinforcements to the Japanese troops.³⁴ The limited air forces left at Henderson piecemealed together individual flights trying to stop the ships, but had no success. Geiger decided to stop the flights and fix enough planes to get larger formations airborne. Combined, with help from B-17s from Espiritu Santo, this succeeded in causing premature beaching of three transports. Because of constant pressure from Cactus, these supply ships never completed their offload.³⁵

³² Merrill B. Twining and Neil G. Carey, *No Bended Knee: The Battle for Guadalcanal: the Memoir of Gen. Merrill B. Twining USMC (Ret.)* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1996), 122.

³³ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 119.

³⁴ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 121.

³⁵ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 130.

The third night brought another hailstorm of indirect fire as the Japanese completed their debarkation of an army division, while pelting Henderson Field with over 1,000 5-inch and 8-inch rounds. This once again left the Cactus Air Force with very few flyable planes. Geiger submitted another emergency call for assistance, and this time he received much needed reinforcements when VMF-212 arrived from Efate with 19 *Wildcats*. Even with these additional aircraft, however, the Cactus Air Force was barely capable of defending Henderson Field or providing support to the First Marine Division. The aircrews suffered from extreme combat exhaustion and after the three-day assault, the Marines were unlikely to retain any defensive capability if the assault continued a single night longer.³⁶

Fortunately, the Japanese, likely unaware of the grave situation at Henderson Field, paused, changing their strategy from a direct attack with ground forces to an enveloping assault from the south. The complex plan required movement into the dense jungle of Guadalcanal, where command, control, and timing was very difficult to orchestrate, made even more challenging by a turn in the weather, as heavy rainfall inhibited ground movement and provided a barrier to incoming Japanese aircraft.³⁷ Geiger took advantage of the decreased activity to change his primary effort from Japanese ships to enemy troops. He also replaced as many aircrew and airplanes as possible with fresh reinforcements. This decrease in activity did not last long, however, as another massive force of Japanese ships steamed south toward Guadalcanal, determined to deliver a final “knockout blow” to the Marines. Geiger and Vandegrift feverishly prepared for the inevitable ground assault.³⁸

³⁶ Wellons, “General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander.” 89.

³⁷ Wellons, “General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander.” 89.

³⁸ Wellons, “General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander.” 90.

On October 22, Admiral Halsey, the new COMSOPAC, summoned General Vandegrift to meet with him on his flagship, USS *Argonne*, which left Geiger in tactical command of the First Marine Division.³⁹ As luck had it, the Japanese forces finally mounted their assault on the Marine perimeter on this day. Geiger now faced the Japanese attack as the commander of both ground and air forces. Despite some narrow escapes, including using his well-timed decision to commit ground reserves when the Marine front lines were almost broken, he repelled the fierce Japanese assault.⁴⁰

Parallel to this battle was a naval conflict with enormous implications. The Battle of the Santa Cruz had significant impact for Guadalcanal.⁴¹ The Japanese knew that, after their previous air losses caused by the Cactus Air Force, their only option was to control the air over Guadalcanal with carrier power. Although Japan won a tactical victory, its forces suffered a significant amount of attrition. The Japanese lost the majority of its combat aircraft from their carrier air group. These results caused the Japanese Imperial fleet to retire, thus providing the forces on Guadalcanal with a critically needed opportunity to rebuild and re-supply.

The Changing Tide

By October 25, the Japanese ended a two-week long effort designed to take out the CACTUS Air Force. The reduced power of the Eleventh Air Fleet left it incapable of undertaking a major bombing mission against Henderson Field. The last two-weeks cost them 25 bombers and 80 fighters. The Cactus Air Force only had 12 of 35 fighters flying, and its only striking power remaining was 11 SDBs and six Army Bells.⁴²

³⁹ Vandegrift, *Once a Marine*, 182.

⁴⁰ Vandegrift, *Once a Marine*, 186.

⁴¹ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 148.

⁴² T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 147.

The leadership of COMAIRCACTUS and the tactical skills of the pilots won out in the end. The momentum turned in the South Pacific, and arguably in the entire Pacific War. Over the next two weeks, the Cactus Air Force increased from the 29 flyable aircraft at the end of October, to over a 100 by mid-December. In addition, aviation-related personnel increased to over 2,000. Also, a supplementary runway was under construction. Now a vision was emerging to use Henderson Field as a base for future operations rather than as an outpost for a desperate last stand. However, Geiger did not see this to fruition, because just as he strengthened his forces and prepared for offensive action, he was relieved of duty, possibly because he displayed symptoms of extreme exhaustion. Against Geiger's will, his second in command, General Louis Woods, replaced him on November 7.⁴³

Conclusion

General Geiger presided over an epic air battle in which a handful of exhausted Marine, Navy, and Army pilots had taken on the entire Japanese 11th Air Fleet to fight it to a standstill. In the process, the 11th Air Fleet lost an estimated 667 aircraft, together with most of their pilots and aircrews. The battle had cost the Cactus Air Force 101 aircraft and 84 pilots and aircrew.⁴⁴ Given the circumstances, this three-to-one ratio in favor of the Cactus Air Force was a stunning victory. To win required Geiger to instill a certain ruthlessness in motivating his command. Those who knew Geiger well, however, speculated the losses suffered by his young flyers had caused him significant grief. It consumed him physically and emotionally.⁴⁵ There is some speculation regarding the circumstances of Geiger's relief, as Geiger, Vandegrift, and even Admiral Halsey resisted the decision. What is clear is that he was not relieved for

⁴³ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 177.

⁴⁴ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 209.

⁴⁵ Hixon *Guadalcanal*, 165.

cause. Rather, it is likely he was simply exhausted and the more senior leaders believed the greatest Japanese threat had passed.⁴⁶

His abrupt departure, however, does not take away from his accomplishments on Guadalcanal. He took over a mish-mash of aviators and aircraft from different services and squadrons and molded them into a fighting team that, against all odds, turned the tables on the Japanese. Geiger was inspirational to the pilots, maintenance crews, Navy Seabees, and the infantry forces his force was defending.⁴⁷ The fact he was a Marine had no bearing on how he treated his men or how he employed his forces. He not only used air power to support his land forces, he also led his air forces in other missions not common to Marine air at that time, such as long range attacks on naval vessels.

Geiger also gained a unique perspective on the employment and organization of joint airpower, one that was rare for a non-Army Air Force aviator. That perspective made him rethink his opinion on airpower, now believing there should be an independent Air Force on equal footing with the Army and Navy, and that there should be a joint staff and joint schooling to enhance future joint operations.

General Geiger set the example for future commanders of COMAIRCACTUS and COMAIRSOLS to follow. His unbiased leadership of joint air forces mitigated service rivalries in his command. In addition, he built many of the processes that continued throughout the remainder of the campaign. Geiger's CACTUS Air Force team overcame all odds and turned the tide in the South Pacific. He was the first leader of one of the best joint air operations in history.

⁴⁶ T. Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 177.

⁴⁷ Wellons, "General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander." 80.

CHAPTER 3

COMAIRSOLS – Admiral Marc A. Mitscher

On February 8, 1943, the Japanese completed a skillful but costly evacuation of Guadalcanal, but they still held plenty of occupied land elsewhere in the Solomons.¹ Although sixty thousand American troops now controlled Guadalcanal, the skies over the Solomon Islands remained hazardous. The enemy could still conduct operations from other positions in the Solomons, such as Munda Point, New Georgia, and Kolombangara. Nevertheless, the Allies, now with control of Guadalcanal, had an airfield within striking distance of these locations. This led to some of the most furious air battles in the Solomon Island Campaign.

It was time for another rotation of the Solomon Islands air commander and it fell to Admiral Halsey to pick someone to lead the campaign. He reflected on his war experience to find a worthy commander. Less than a year before, he joined with an admiral to slip into the North Pacific aboard the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* carriers that delivered Jimmy Doolittle's surprise attack on Tokyo.² This admiral was Marc Mitscher, whom Halsey believed knew airpower and moreover in Halsey's estimation was a "fighting fool."³

The operational environment had changed somewhat since the initial CACTUS Air Force. It became apparent to Harmon that theater commanders were not fully integrating Thirteenth Air Force into matters pertaining to administrative control of Army Air Force units.⁴ With Halsey's approval, Harmon and Fitch resolved the command structure debate with further clarifications on the functions of the air services in

¹Theodore Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher* (New York: Norton, 1954), 144.

² Don Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 211.

³David Armine Howarth, *The Men-of-War*. (Alexandria, Va: Time-Life Books, 1978), 252.

⁴ Excerpts From The Army in the South Pacific," by Lt Gen Millard F. Harmon, File # 750.04-64, p 5, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

the area in the form of a new air operation plan for Solomon air units. The plan assigned three tasks, but only the first task, “destroy enemy shipping,” would traditionally fall under Mitscher as a Navy air commander. Now that he had a joint team, he would need to best integrate his flyers to accomplish the other two tasks as well, which were to “strike the enemy shore installations,” and to “support the operations of Allied surface forces in the Solomons.”⁵

The plan also delineated tasks to the organizations within the command, which now included Bomber Command, Fighter Command, and Strike Command. These commands had a variety of aircraft available, the number and type of which changed throughout the campaign. The primary aircraft for Bomber Command were B-17s, B-24s, and Navy PB4Ys, and was always commanded by an Army Air Force officer. Strike Command mostly contained Marine SBDs and TBFs, and therefore always had a Marine Commander. Fighter Command had a wide variety of aircraft, including Army P-38s and P-39s, and Navy and Marine Corsairs, Hellcats, and Wildcats, and New Zealand P-40s, the commander of which varied between the services.⁶ Bomber Command conducted long-range attacks against surface forces, airfields, and ground installations as ordered, and for executing necessary search and patrol missions. Strike Command carried out dive, glide, or low-level bombing attacks upon enemy surface units and airfields. Fighter Command’s duties included assault, defense and escort, both for surface craft and bombers, as well as operation of all air warning service units, fighter directors, and all equipment concerned with the interception of enemy aircraft.⁷

⁵ Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan August 1942 to July 1944* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 210.

⁶ Maj Victor Dykes, Intelligence Office in the Solomon Islands Campaign. Report on COMAIRSOLS. 8 Aug 1942 – 15 Jun 1944., File #749.01,.p. 2. Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁷ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 211.

The air commander's title changed to Commander Air Solomons, or COMAIRSOLS, and his responsibilities become more defined than previous. Although COMAIRSOPAC controlled the general directives and tempo of operations, COMAIRSOLS had operational control of the aircraft. Much of this structure remained the same as the organization under Geiger, but now the duties were official rather than ad hoc. Although Harmon conceded the issue of operational command, he insisted the Army Air Force retain direct responsibility for all matters of administration, supply, movement, and training-- and that the employment of his force take place with sound Army air doctrine and technique in mind.⁸

It did not take long for Admiral Mitscher to realize he stepped into a violent struggle. As soon as he arrived on Guadalcanal he witnessed an enormous air battle right over Henderson Field, in which three Japanese Zeros and four marine Wildcats were shot out of the sky. He immediately recognized his tremendous command challenges. Despite the intensity of such aerial duels, Mitscher's first challenge as COMAIRSOLS was lethargy. What had previously been the usual griping now morphed into a general but dangerous fatigue. The physical and mental depression of the ground troops spread to the aircrews after the tremendous fight against Japanese forces.⁹ He discovered several squadron commanders no longer wanted to fly. He immediately fired them and invited any other "cowards" to follow them. In the first week of command, Mitscher paid more attention to morale, living conditions, and logistics than to fighting the Japanese.¹⁰

Another challenge for Mitscher was dealing with the inhospitable accommodations of Guadalcanal. The conditions appalled him.

⁸ Excerpts From The Army in the South Pacific," by Lt Gen Millard F. Harmon, File # 750.04-64, p 5, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁹ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 145.

¹⁰Charles W. Koburger, *Pacific Turning Point: The Solomons Campaign, 1942-1943* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1995), 83.

Although the situation had improved from the early days, he and his troops still had to endure life in the pouring rain and blistering sun. He pressed Halsey for galley equipment, huts, mess plates, and shipments of decent food. His own accommodations were a canvas tent, where he used a footlocker as a desk.¹¹ Despite the difficult situation, Mitscher ignored his own personal discomforts and started planning to take the fight to the enemy.¹²

Mitscher's operations headquarters was in a Quonset hut by a river. There was a duplicate operations center behind it, located in a dugout made of concrete, palm tree logs, and sandbags. Mitscher entered the dugout five or ten minutes before each raid and came out when the attacks subsided.

Mitscher's personal staff consisted of only Marine and Navy personnel. This is more likely due to combining his previous staff from the carrier with existing staff at Guadalcanal than a mistrust of the Army Air Force. He had did not hesitate to side with the Army Air Force if he felt his planners failed to incorporate them effectively.¹³ His Fighter and Bomber Commands were divided between the Army Air Force and the Marines. In addition, there was a strike command and an intelligence section. Also integrated into the joint structure was a New Zealand fighter squadron.¹⁴

Initial operations consisted of his combined air force exchanging blows daily with the Japanese. The objective for Mitscher's forces was to punish Japanese airfields in the Solomons. The Japanese soon changed tactics and began retaliating at night. The men felt vulnerable and helpless to stop the night attacks, but Mitscher nevertheless knew he needed to do something to stop the deadly assaults. He decided to

¹¹ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 147.

¹² Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 211.

¹³ Mitscher sided with Army Air Force personnel on the planning and execution of the Yamamoto mission.

¹⁴ Eric M. Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky: The Air War in the South Pacific* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 435.

combine a P-38 with a ground-based searchlight, which soon resulted in shooting down a Japanese plane. This improved the atmosphere on the ground and the men now knew they could defend themselves.¹⁵

The daylight attacks were easier to handle. A fighter-director system was established, leading to near perfect communication between ground and air. The enemy was usually spotted by coastwatchers and radar, and information and directions were passed by radio. Mitscher liked the enemy to come all the way to the field, because he knew they only had a limited supply of gas. They made the Japanese fight, depleting their fuel, and then chased them out to sea.¹⁶

Yamamoto

On April 14, Navy code breakers intercepted and deciphered a message that Admiral Yamamoto, the Commander in Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, was coming to inspect his front lines.¹⁷ Travelling by air, he would be within the extreme range of COMAIRSOLS aircraft. Nimitz gave Halsey permission plan an attack to shoot down Yamamoto's airplane.

Mitscher, after receiving word from Halsey, held a meeting of his senior staff. His staff showed its Navy slant by leaning toward hitting Yamamoto after he landed and boarded a ship. They then tried to determine a way to use a Navy or Marine aircraft for the mission, but all had a limited fuel capacity. This left the P-38s, which belonged to the Army.¹⁸ These planes were added to Guadalcanal in April, increasing the capability of Mitscher's team.¹⁹

Others argued Army pilots were not aggressive enough for the mission.²⁰ Before, when they had flown P-400s and P-39s, other flyers did not see them as true equals because the planes were more limited in

¹⁵ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 147.

¹⁶ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 147.

¹⁷ Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 228.

¹⁸ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 213.

¹⁹ Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky*, 435.

²⁰ Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 232.

capability. Now, in the superior P-38s, Army pilots could dogfight as well as any other plane on the island. Competitive grumbling surfaced because Army flyers stole some of the limelight of the Navy and Marine squadrons. Some eventually conceded that the P-38 Lightning pilots were among the best on the island. Nevertheless, jealousy existed, and the decision to use P-38s disappointed many Navy pilots.²¹

Mitscher, however, was no such skeptic. He appreciated the skills and bravery of the Army pilots and knew they would go after Yamamoto with the same ambition as another Army pilot he had worked with only a year ago, Jimmy Doolittle.²² He had witnessed the Army unit's abilities over the previous two weeks since he became COMAIRSOLS and was impressed with their hard work and record against the Japanese air raids. For the mission, Mitscher handpicked the crews that he felt were the best.²³

When the pilots entered the prebrief for the mission, they were among the lowest-ranking officers there. As Army officers, they felt almost like intruders in the Navy-Marine gathering.²⁴ Prior to the war, they were not used to the Navy dictating their plan of operations. As for the Navy officers there, if they could not fly the mission, then they at least wanted to control the planning effort.²⁵ The briefers did not want any input from the aircrew, and dictated the details of the entire mission. In the quest for the big prize, it seemed that service rivalry was making an intrusive appearance.

After a few minutes of Navy staffers micromanaging the effort, the Army flight lead, Maj John Mitchell, had enough. One of the areas he disagreed with was the Navy plan to hit Yamamoto after he boarded the ship. He believed there was a better chance of killing him in the air. A

²¹ Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 233.

²² Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 233.

²³ Edwin Palmer Hoyt, *The Glory of the Solomons* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), 73-74.

²⁴ Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 236.

²⁵ Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 237.

debate ensued and it was Mitscher who intervened and made the call. He said, “Well, since Mitchell has to make the interception, I think it should be done his way.” He then turned and asked Mitchell how he wanted to do it. Mitchell reiterated that the best chance of success was to take Yamamoto out in the air. “You got it,” Mitscher stated, with an air of conclusiveness that everybody in the room understood was the final decision.²⁶

Admiral Mitscher waved from his jeep as the planes took off for the historic mission.²⁷ He experienced a de-já-vu moment, because exactly a year earlier, on April 18, 1942, he was on the deck of his aircraft carrier watching the Doolittle Raiders take off for Tokyo. When the crews returned after successfully killing Yamamoto, Mitscher sent a message to Halsey reporting the mission success. In reference to their experience the previous year, Mitscher wrote, “April 18 seems to be our day.”²⁸ The Navy later awarded Mitchell and the attack section the Navy Cross for their tremendous effort and success in killing Yamamoto.²⁹

Other Operations

The focus for Mitscher now was eliminating the air threat to Guadalcanal and preparing for an eventual push up the Solomon Island chain. Of particular interest were the new Japanese fields at Munda Point in the New Georgia Islands, on the northwestern edge of the Slot, about 200 miles from Henderson Field. Out of the estimated 40,000 Japanese forces in the Solomons, 8,000 to 10,000 were in New Georgia.³⁰ In addition, American intelligence discovered a Japanese base in the same area on the island of Kolombangara. Both remained operational despite frequent air attacks and naval bombardment.

²⁶ Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 239.

²⁷ Hoyt, *The Glory of the Solomons*, 74.

²⁸ Davis, *Lightning Strike*, 283.

²⁹ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 214.

³⁰ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 221.

Mitscher continued to build up his existing airfields and press the completion of Carney Field, which was to be a bomber base. Meanwhile, he hit the enemy at Munda and Vila and began to soften up Buin and Kahili as a prelude to the invasion of New Georgia. One problem was that only one third of his aircraft were operational at any one time. In addition, faulty navigation and hazardous weather caused more casualties than did combat sorties. He began sending up weather planes to obtain advanced warning on approaching fronts, which aided the planning and execution of missions.³¹

The weather missions were not the only non-lethal use of airpower Mitscher embraced. Mitscher utilized air power to the fullest, in all of its capabilities. He realized support operations were crucial to combat success. It was no coincidence that offensive results improved when a more intense focus on reconnaissance, photography, and rescue capability were introduced. He was most proud of rescuing pilots than any combat success.

This did, however, cause more interservice tension, mostly in the higher echelons of the Army Air Force. The Army leaders did not like the employment of its assets in a support role, such as the use of the B-17 for reconnaissance missions. Mitscher knew that 90 percent of the results were negative, but the positive 10 percent led to important intelligence.³² Army Air Force leaders from Hap Arnold down to General Harmon were displeased, as their view of strategic airpower was offensive in nature.³³ For Arnold, it is also likely that using a strategic bomber for this role did not fit his view of independent air power.

Other interservice tensions increased as well, coinciding with U.S. forces gaining the upper hand on the Japanese throughout the Pacific. It seemed as if now that survival was no longer at stake, these rivalries

³¹ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 153.

³² Koburger, *Pacific Turning Point*, 83.

³³General H Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 341. Also in *Guadalcanal 70*, and the Origins of the 13th air force, 71.

reemerged with greater intensity. Most of the service tension occurred between Navy and Marine pilots on one side and the Army flyers on the other. On one side, Army morale was affected by the poor living conditions in comparison with the Navy personnel. The Navy had material to floor and screen its tents, and its food was better.³⁴ The Army had no floors under its tents, and had few of the luxury items that the Navy personnel enjoyed.

The Navy and Marines had complaints as well. Most of their animosity existed because the Army squadrons were bound by instructions from Army Air Force officials in Washington, which field commanders could not change regardless of the tactical situation. One such instruction indicated pilots could fly only one day in four. The result was Navy and Marine pilots bore the brunt of extra flights and flew about twice as often as the Army pilots.³⁵ Under these conditions, animosity was inevitable, but Mitscher pressed forward without any recorded complaints, doing what he could to take care of his airmen.

Mitscher always rewarded his men for their hard work, but at first, it was not always appreciated. After a heroic duty by one of the Army pilots, Mitscher wanted to recommend him for the Navy Cross. His Army squadron commander said he did not want his men to receive Navy medals. Mitscher, disappointed, asked to speak to him. After the meeting, the Army squadron commander felt horrible, and said he now understood that Mitscher thought everyone was on the same team, and that the award was a sincere token of his appreciation. Word spread, and Mitscher personally asked the next Army pilot who performed a heroic activity what award he wanted. The pilot responded, "The Navy Cross, Admiral."³⁶

³⁴ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 270.

³⁵ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 154.

³⁶ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 155.

Mitscher also took an opportunity to show an example of Geiger-like bravery to demonstrate how much his men meant to him. There was increasing instances of his pilots receiving pot shots from U.S. Fleet ships. After numerous complaints, the situation was not improving. To make a point, Mitscher sent a message to the Fleet stating he himself would fly that night over the ships. He flew over very low, and the ships did not shoot at him.³⁷

Another way he rewarded his men was by giving them cases of whisky. The men, with limited opportunities to release their extreme tension, appreciated this gift more than anything else. This appreciation from Mitscher went a long way to promote unified morale on Guadalcanal. This spirit came at a good time, because the biggest air battle was yet to come.

New Georgia

Throughout June COMAIRSOLS continued to attack New Georgia, in support of the upcoming Allied invasion. Strike by strike Mitscher gradually wore the enemy down. Just when it appeared the enemy on New Georgia was significantly degraded, on June 16 the Japanese launched a desperate, all out air attack of 219 aircraft from Munda and Kahill.³⁸ Mitscher received the news of the incoming attack with surprising calm, as he had the utmost confidence in his AIRSOLS team.

Rather than hiding in the dugout, he decided to go to the top of a hill to “watch the fun.” P-38 Lightnings first entered the action and downed the high-flying Zeros providing cover for the bombers. Then Wildcats and Corsairs attacked the bombers, who were looking to bomb Henderson Field and shipping areas. The Japanese were overwhelmingly defeated. Mitscher leisurely walked back to the cottage after watching the largest air battle of the Solomon Islands Campaign. They shot down

³⁷ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 154.

³⁸ Koburger, *Pacific Turning Point*, 83.

at least 94 enemy planes.³⁹ Whisky and more decorations awaited the men.⁴⁰

In addition, throughout the New Georgia campaign, Admiral Mitscher had an intense focus on using air in attacking Japanese shipping, perhaps due to his Navy background. At first, it was very ineffective. In his first attempt in July, he sent 220 planes against a large concentration of Japanese ships, but succeeded in sinking only one vessel.⁴¹ With practice and refined tactics, the remaining weeks of July brought more success. Using skip-bombing and low altitude passes, AIRSOLS sank a significant number of vessels, including cruisers, destroyers, and transports.

Now that AIRSOLS had considerably softened up New Georgia, it was time for the Marine invasion of the island. Preliminary landings took place on June 21 and 30, and by July 2 and 3 ground commanders reported success. Because the remaining Japanese air strength was just pulled out to regroup, the landings went largely unopposed.⁴² Not until over the landings were completed did the Japanese airplanes arrive overhead. They brought 27 bombers and around 45 fighters from Rabaul, and were slaughtered by 44 Allied defenders; 15 bombers and 30 fighters were shot down at the loss of only three COMAIRSOLS fighters. After these enormous losses, the Japanese virtually abandoned their attempts to attack from the air the invaders on New Georgia.⁴³

Conclusion

Mitscher was proud of his Guadalcanal duty. The air threat to the Solomons had been destroyed, and his forces figured they had shot down 340 Japanese fighters and 132 bombers. In addition, they sank 18 ships, and damaged eight others. He was especially proud of his search

³⁹ "History of Thirteenth Air Force." File # 750.01, p. 4. Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 158.

⁴¹ Hoyt, *The Glory of the Solomons*, 152-153.

⁴² Koburger, *Pacific Turning Point*, 87.

⁴³ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 225.

and rescue forces, which saved 131 men from hostile waters and beaches. In addition, he minimized the service rivalries prevalent at the beginning of his command.

During his change of command ceremony with Twining, Mitscher interrupted the event to talk to his people. He told them, “I’ve had a lot of duty...but I’m prouder of this organization than of any other...I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the teamwork you’ve shown.” In addition, his outgoing correspondence indicated that he felt his team on Guadalcanal was the best air force he knew and the one known most to the Japanese.⁴⁴

Mitscher’s self-sacrifice on Guadalcanal was obvious. He cared deeply for his joint aviators. By the end of the ordeal, he was weak and ill. There are unconfirmed reports stating he suffered two separate heart attacks while on Guadalcanal.⁴⁵ His wife was shocked at the condition he was in upon his return to San Diego. She had not seen him for more than a year, and the man she saw had hollow cheeks and dull, tired eyes. She could not believe a “dirty little island” had so ravaged her husband.⁴⁶ He did not even get a single day off before taking his next duty as Commander, Fleet Air, West Coast.

Mitscher performed many difficult duties during the war. He was blasted off two ships and served at Okinawa. However, when asked which assignment was the toughest, he said, “Guadalcanal.” He could not forget the miserable days in the camp by the river.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 161.

⁴⁵ Howarth, *The Men-of-War*, 262.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 162.

⁴⁷ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 332.

CHAPTER 4

COMAIRSOLS – General Nathan F. Twining

As the New Georgia operation neared completion, Admiral Halsey named a new COMAIRSOLS. Keeping with his policy of rotating his top land-based air command among the services, he turned to the Army Air Forces for the post. In Halsey's opinion, the best person for the job was the Thirteenth Air Force Commander, General Nathan Twining.

General Twining had been originally sent to the South Pacific as chief of staff to Maj. General Harmon. When Harmon failed to get the operational control he desired of the Army Air Forces in theater, his compromise with Naval leaders resulted in the formation of the Thirteenth Air Force. The Thirteenth Air Force's mission was to assist Allied ground and naval efforts to rid the Solomons of the Japanese.¹ General Twining was chosen as commander because Harmon believed he was the best-qualified officer available. If Harmon could not have operational control, he believed he needed personal and constant contact with operations to ensure the planning and execution of missions in conformance with proper AAF doctrine.² To aide in that function, Twining established his headquarters near Admiral Fitch on Espiritu Santo to help facilitate good relations.³ Harmon believed Twining was now in position to improve employment of aircraft because of the opportunity for joint planning and supervision of air activities.⁴

Twining was the first Army Air Force officer to assume the duties as COMAIRSOLS. He maintained his command of the Thirteenth Air Force, therefore finally giving the Army Air Force full control of joint air operations. He also brought some of his Army staff over to the

¹ J. Britt McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining: The Making of a Disciple of American Strategic Air Power, 1897-1953" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1989), 66.

² Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan August 1942 to July 1944* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 70.

³ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 65.

⁴ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 72.

command, and the COMAIRSOLS staff now consisted of Army, Navy, and Marine officers.⁵ This marked the first time in COMAIRSOLS short history all three services were represented at its headquarters level. This ensured operational expertise in all manners of airpower employment, especially in an era when service leaders lacked joint experience.

Just as Twining became a joint air commander, Arnold was busy installing his own version of air-mindedness in his air commanders. Arnold wanted strategic bombing advocates, and shortly before Twining assumed command, General Arnold sent a letter to all of his commanders reminding them strategic airpower could “lift an Air Force from the status of an auxiliary arm to that of an equal with arms which serve in other mediums.”⁶ Prior to the war Twining shared Arnold’s hopes, but now in a combat zone he had to fight the war before him. Therefore, while Twining understood Arnold’s message, it was contradictory to his observations as COMAIRSOLS, where the success or failure of most missions hinged on joint planning, combined operations, and fighters, which were the workhorse of the Pacific theater.⁷

Twining initially had a mixed opinion on the operational status of COMAIRSOLS. Although Mitscher left Twining with a seasoned and mature air organization, the air and ground crews, not mention his equipment, were exhausted.⁸ Continuously in contact with Hap Arnold, Twining wrote to him, “The old regime really went to town on air operations here the last few weeks, and as a result the air units are

⁵ Headquarters COMAIRSOLS Announcement of Staff Officers, 25 July 1943, Box 121, Twining Files, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Gen H.H. Arnold, Commanding General, Army Air Forces. Letter to All Air Force Commanders in Combat Zones, 10 June 1943. Box 121, Twining Files, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷ John C. Stratton, “Endearing Leadership of Enduring Organizations”: General Nathan F. Twining and the Dichotomous Air Wars of the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Air Forces During World War II” (Draft Thesis. School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2011).

⁸ McCarley, “General Nathan Farragut Twining,” 94.

pretty well shot, particularly the fighters.”⁹ Revamping his fighter stock proved one of his biggest challenges throughout his command.

Thankfully, there was a difference between what Twining now faced compared to the original conditions in the Solomons. Whereas in the initial struggles for Guadalcanal the Japanese controlled the sea approaches and all of the air except for around Henderson, now the enemy controlled neither. Attritional battles continued in the air, but these generally favored the Allies and removed the remainder of the air threat to the Allied landings on New Georgia.¹⁰

The ground threat, however, still existed, and taking Munda Field proved more difficult than expected. The Japanese were resilient and their short supply lines strengthened their effort and resolve. They had a strong base at Bougainville, naval forces ready, a thorough, well-constructed and concealed defense system, and were located on terrain that made it extremely difficult for allied air operations to be effective.¹¹ The terrain also impeded close air support operations, as the lack of visibility kept flyers from identifying the enemy and making sure there was sufficient distance between the enemy and friendly forces to drop ordinance.¹² Therefore, true ground-controlled close air support did not yet exist. Regardless, the New Georgia portion of the campaign once again demonstrated the critical importance of providing effective air support for an amphibious operation.¹³ Bombers were able to attack areas where concealment was difficult, such as supply dumps, bivouac areas, and artillery positions. In these attacks, Strike Command

⁹ General Nathan F. Twining. Letter to General H.H. Arnold, 29 Jul 1943, Box #121, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 224-225.

¹¹ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 231.

¹² General Nathan F. Twining. Letter to General H.H. Arnold, 29 Jul 1943, Twining mentions, “The Corps has not asked for close support due to the immediate proximity of the two lines in dense jungle...the infantry advance has been very slow.” Box #121, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹³ Allan Reed Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co, 1980), 380.

furnished Marine TBF's and SDB's, and AAF bombers frequently joined them.¹⁴

Twining's first day on the job coincided with the heaviest air bombardment yet seen in the South Pacific. Against three target areas covering less than one-half square mile, a force of 171 light, medium, and heavy bombers dropped more than 145 tons of bombs within a period of slightly more than a half hour. The attack continued over the next ten days, and finally, on August 5, the Japanese evacuated and all organized resistance ceased around Munda Field.¹⁵

The focus was now on getting the airfield at Munda ready for Allied air operations, with the immediate goal of defense and reconstruction.¹⁶ Japanese interference was expected, but, because of attrition, they were unable to perform effective attacks during the reconstruction process. Therefore, Munda very quickly became a key installation in the Solomons. Its importance stemmed from its strategic position, as all Japanese bases in the Solomons were now within range of the light bombers and fighters. Twining used the strong coral runway to the utmost capacity and before many weeks had past, Munda traffic exceeded that of any other airfield in the South Pacific.¹⁷

As the focus of the campaign turned, Twining meticulously assessed the operational environment. He kept in-depth statistical data on a wide variety of operational information. Where previous COMAIRSOLS commanders merely kept crude records of friendly and enemy air losses, Twining had detailed charts, graphics, and photographs. The reason for this detail is likely due to correspondence he received from Arnold when taking over the position, which discussed insufficient tracking and reporting of data. Arnold wrote, "I have felt for some time what is now becoming daily more apparent; that this report no

¹⁴ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 232.

¹⁵ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 233.

¹⁶ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 235.

¹⁷ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 237.

longer suffices.” He mentioned better information was important for “whole-hearted public and official support of our Air Forces in their operation, that the people understand thoroughly our Air Forces precepts, principles, and purposes.” Furthermore, he said, “it is important for the people to understand that our prime purpose is destruction of the enemy’s ability to wage war, by our planned persistent bombing and sapping of his vital industries, his transportation, and his whole supply system.” He concluded with “it will win the war and save perhaps millions of lives which otherwise would be sacrificed in bloody ground combat...therefore I want special attention devoted to the manner of reporting bombing missions.”¹⁸



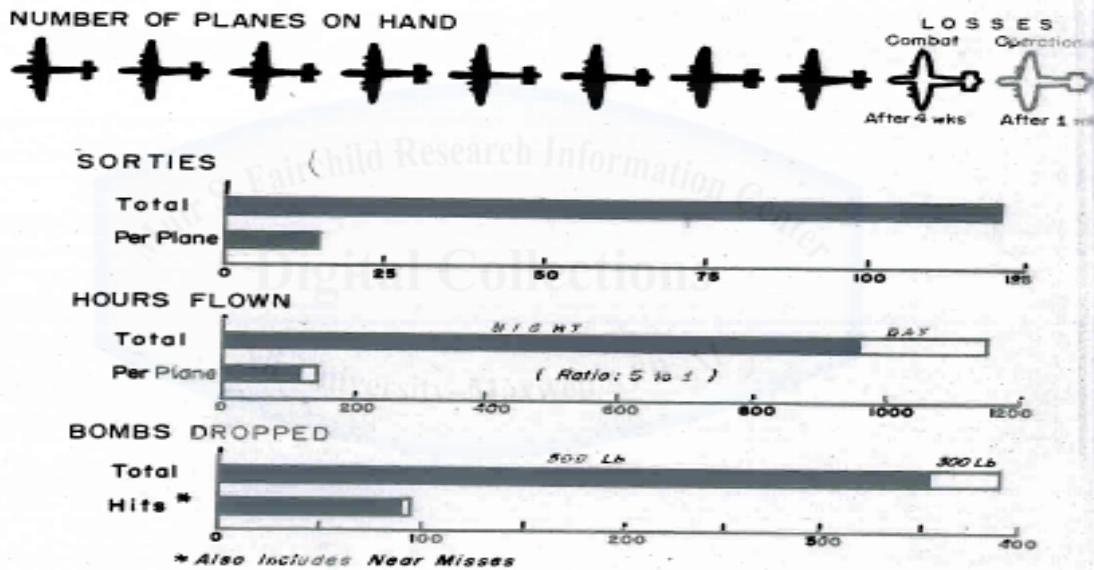
¹⁸ General H. Arnold, Letter to Gen N.F. Twining, 7 July 1943. Box 121, Twining Files, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

AIR ACTION BY

COM AIR SOLS

April 1 - July 25, 1943.

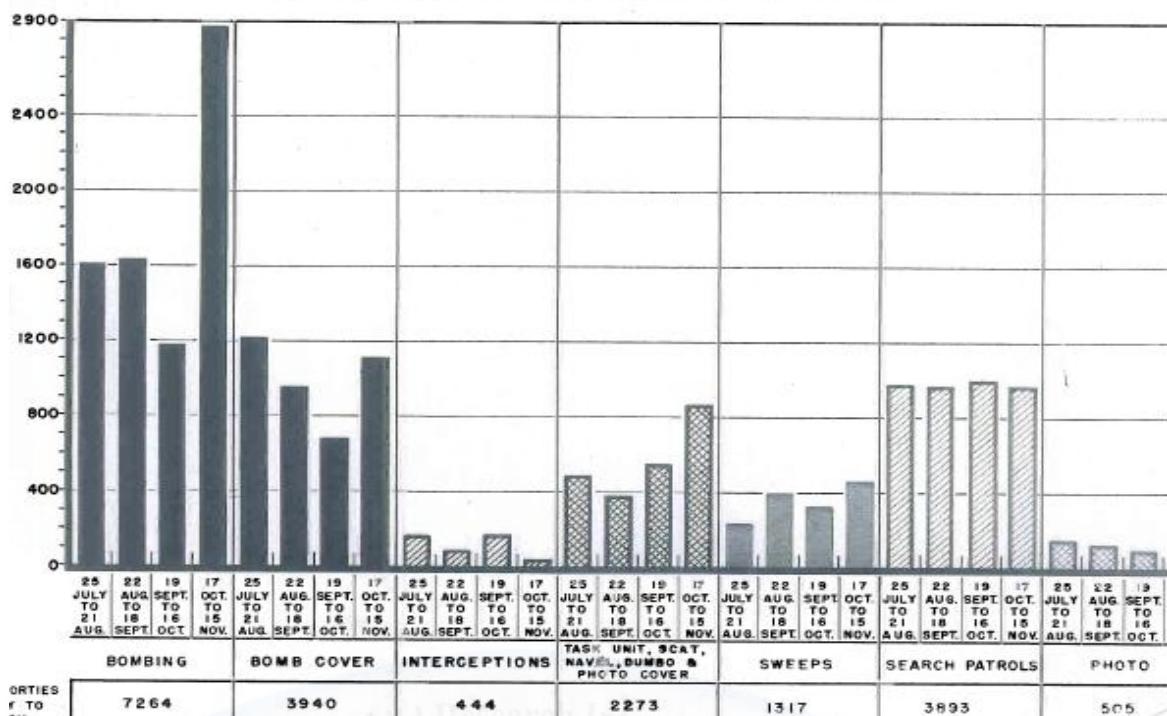
Jap Fighters Destroyed by Air	428)	Total-564
Jap Bombers Destroyed by Air	136)	
Jap Ships Sunk	24	
Jap Ships Damaged	28	
Jap Barges, LC Sunk	9	
Jap Barges, LC Damaged	16	
Number US Bombing Missions	200	
Tons Bombs dropped by US	2899	
Allied Pilots Rescued by Air	62	
Allied Crewmen Rescued by Air	86	
People Evacuated by Air	252	
Tons Supplies Dropped DC-3	78	

IN THE SOLOMONS AREA
(27 AUGUST TO 15 NOVEMBER 1943)

	T A R G E T S						
A/C Carrier Or Aux. Landing Carrier	Cruiser	Destroyer	Submarine	Barge	Cargo	Unidentif.	Island
Sightings	1	2	12	7	28	7	109
Attacked	1	2	10	5	17	5	66
Sunk *	—	—	3	1	2	—	1
Hits	3	2	7	1	2	7	16
Near Misses	4	4	8	12	5	26	—

* This Includes Only Verified Sinkings. A Large Number Could Not Be Officially Credited Due To Necessity Of Quick Withdrawal And Darkness.

HEADQUARTERS COMAIRSOLS 25 JULY - 15 NOVEMBER



HEADQUARTERS COMAIRSOLS 25 JULY - 15 NOVEMBER, 1943

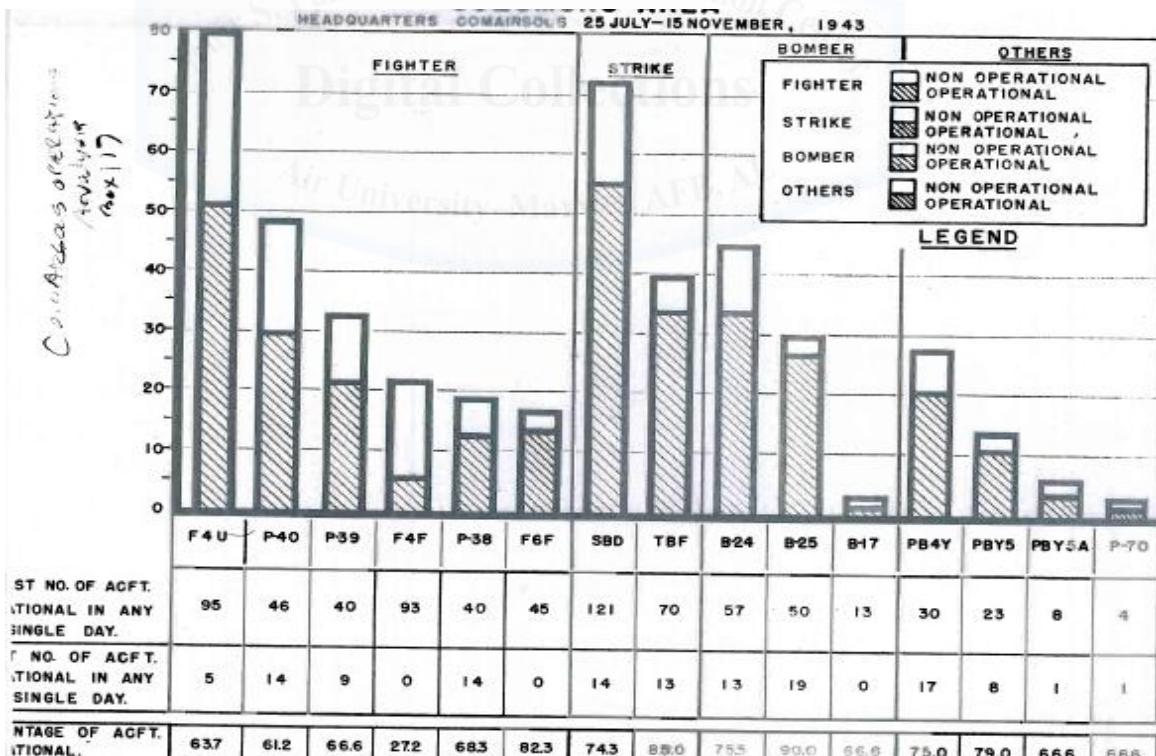


Figure 3: Comparing the ways COMAIRSOLS commanders recorded statistical data. **Source:** Box #117, Twining Files, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The first chart is an example of how the initial COMAIRSOLS reported data. The bottom three charts are an example of the more thorough analysis conducted under Twining.

Bougainville

It was time now to turn the focus of Allied operations to Bougainville. Bougainville was the largest island in the Solomon chain and the final barrier between Rabaul and the Allies in the South Pacific. The capture of Bougainville was the final land phase of the Solomon operations.¹⁹ Unlike New Georgia, it possessed terrain favorable for airfields and was easily reinforceable from Rabaul.

There were many disagreements about the plan for Bougainville. MacArthur, Halsey, Harmon and other leaders all had different ideas on how to tackle the problem, where to land forces, where to focus air efforts, and what locations were in proximity to current forces yet still conducive to conduct further attacks against Rabaul. Central to everyone's argument, however, was fighter coverage. Fighter coverage was the lead factor driving the decision-making and no one wanted to conduct operations without it, including Harmon and Twining. This is a remarkable mindset change for air leaders, as just five years earlier, instructors at the Air Corp Tactical School taught air commanders that fighters were not vital to air success. Arnold had written, "Pursuit or fighter airplanes operating from frontline airdromes will rarely intercept modern bombers except accidentally."²⁰

Twining struggled with the fighter allocation due to the high demand for them. Fighters had orders to escort Navy task forces before, during, and after missions into Japanese-controlled waters around Bougainville. In addition, fighters attacked all types of naval vessels, escorted bombing missions, maintained air cover for the islands currently under allied control, and conducted raids against enemy-controlled islands.²¹ Twining repeatedly expressed his concerns and felt

¹⁹ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 245.

²⁰ Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas About Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 168.

²¹ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 97-98.

the need for additional P-38s was urgent. He asked Arnold, Harmon, and Brigadier General La Verne Saunders, the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, for help.²² Twining also complained that the Navy was not providing their fare share of fighters.²³ Twining was not happy, but he pressed forward and maintained his good relationship with Fitch, Halsey, and Arnold. The problem was not addressed until another month passed, when additional P-38s arrived and the Navy finally provided more support.

By September, the lack of fighters began to impact COMAIRSOLS performance. Arnold noticed these problems as well, possibly because of the enhanced statistical data he now received from Twining. He noticed the Thirteenth Air Force traded losses on nearly a one-to-one basis with the Japanese in September.²⁴ Twining reaffirmed he was unable to attain optimum use of his bombers without the fighter escort, a problem that further inhibited any systematic planning of operations. Other reasons for the decreased ratio may have been due to enemy attrition, which left the Japanese incapable of sending large waves of aircraft to their deaths at the hands of the allies. In addition, many of the attacks now came at night, where Japan fighters were proficient and had mild success.²⁵ Despite these problems, Arnold was quick to let Twining know he was doing a good job, but also told him he could not provide more fighters because they all were needed for operations against Germany.²⁶

In Arnold's defense, he was juggling competing priorities between two enormous theaters. It was not simply an agenda to push assets

²² General Nathan F. Twining. Letters to Gen M.F. Harmon, July 7, 1943, and Gen La Verne Saunders, July 8, 1943. Box #118, Twining Files, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²³ General Nathan F. Twining. Letter to Gen M.F. Harmon, July 7, 1943. Box #118, Twining Files, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁴ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 101.

²⁵ General Nathan F. Twining. Letter to Gen H.H. Arnold, 29 Jul 1943. Box 118, Twining files, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁶ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 102.

toward a theater better fit for strategic airpower. Arnold had to follow the wishes of the President, who made the decision to make Germany the top priority. Arnold agreed with this decision, as his position allowed for more of a worldview for allocation. At the time, Arnold believed the Allies had the edge in the Pacific, while the defeat of Germany remained in question. Another reason Arnold hesitated to give up more P-38s was the conflicting information he received from theater. Initially, Harmon and Twining both said they were happy with the performance of the P-39.²⁷ Now they had changed their mind and wanted more P-38s. The back and forth between Washington and the South Pacific regarding the P-38s showed how joint the air war in the Pacific had become.

On September 20, Twining received his instructions for the tasks he was to complete by the invasion. Fitch mandated four tasks: make Japanese air operation from south Bougainville too expensive to maintain; further isolate Japanese island ground forces by attacking enemy shipping; get the New Georgia and Vella Lavella airfields in peak operating condition; and organize a target-of-opportunity strike force with any excess aircraft.²⁸

D-Day for the Bougainville invasion was set for November 1. Halsey issued the warning order on September 22. Fitch's operations plan for the invasion assigned COMAIRSOLS the task of search and defense on the sea approaches to Bougainville, maximum air coverage and support of the amphibious forces on the beaches, and air defense of the area against attacks coming from Rabaul or other parts of Bougainville. To conduct the operations, Twining had more than 650 combat planes at his disposal. He had Marine Corsairs, F4U's, P-39s, P-40s, F6Fs, P-38s, TBFs, B-25s, B-24s, PB4Ys, and New Zealand Venturas. This represented the highest point yet in number of airplanes provided by the four different air services and represented a sharp

²⁷ General H Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 342-343.

²⁸ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 99.

contrast from the days at Guadalcanal when at times there were less than ten aircraft.²⁹

Twining's anti-barge operations leading up to the invasion were a major success. Barges were the only effective way the Japanese could reinforce and resupply their forces in the Solomons. They were more maneuverable and easier to defend than the large supply ships used previously. Twining turned to his B-25s and P-39s with their effective forward-firing cannon in day operations. At night, he used a radar-equipped version of the B-24 for the effort. This led to a tremendous amount of success and lofty praise from Admiral Halsey.³⁰

The most important part of the Bougainville operation was the necessity for Twining's bombers to negate the ability for the enemy to launch aircraft. Therefore, prior to the invasion, he sent bombers to destroy enemy air facilities. By the middle of October, the bombers had significantly degraded Japanese air power in Bougainville.³¹

From then until the invasion on November 1, Twining utilized the distinct capabilities of each type of aircraft to continue the onslaught. Marine SBD and TBF from strike command attacked enemy airstrips with dive and glide bombing, concentrating on the anti-aircraft defenses and runways of the enemy airfield. B-24s and B-25s, with fighter escort by P-39s, P-40s, F6Fs, and F4Us, bombed runways, planes, and ground installations, sometimes attacking all at once.³²

Close air support did not play a significant role. The only aviation squadrons that believed in the still controversial tactic, the Marines, had been used primarily for air superiority and interdiction operations.³³ By the time the invasion took place, the threat from enemy airfields on southern Bougainville was minimal. Twining's overall plan to keep

²⁹ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 251.

³⁰ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 99.

³¹ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 253.

³² Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 254.

³³ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 386-387.

Japan from repairing its airfields paid off, and he had knocked all the Japanese airstrips on Bougainville out of commission.³⁴ However, the Japanese air forces regrouped in and attacked from Rabaul.

After diversionary raids against neighboring islands, the Marines invaded Bougainville on schedule. The location, Cape Torkina, was far from the centers of Japanese remaining strength on the island, but close to an area deemed suitable for airfield construction. Twining's fighters formed an aerial shield over the beachhead and kept all but a few Japanese planes away from the Marines.³⁵ Despite this initial success, the Japanese were planning a major operation to take out the naval forces covering the Marine landing with newly arrived cruisers and destroyers.

Halsey had to take action, and Twining gave him the idea for the plan. Twining believed Halsey needed to use the carriers to their fullest potential, not just the hit-and-run tactics used to ensure carrier survivability. He suggested Halsey take all the carrier fighters and send them to smash Rabaul, while Twining would send his land-based fighters to protect the carriers.³⁶ This would allow the unusual luxury of sending all carrier aircraft to the Japanese naval base without having to hold them back in defense of the task force. After discussing it with his staff, Halsey approved the plan.

The use of Army Air Force assets to defend a carrier, and carrier aircraft to strike fixed installations, is a great example of the unique joint air operations taking place in the Solomon Islands Campaign. These joint commanders put aside their service parochialism and traditional methods of employment to get the job done.

The raid was a great success. They damaged several ships, and few Navy aircraft were lost. Twining's fighter cover intercepted and

³⁴ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 103.

³⁵ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 104.

³⁶ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 106.

stopped all Japanese aircraft sent to attack the task force.³⁷ The successful operation showed both Twining's innovation, and Halsey's trust in his Army Air Force commander. Halsey liked the tactic so much that he used it again later in the month.

There were also examples of the mindset differences among leaders of different services. For example, Twining disagreed with Halsey's tactics on one of the later Rabaul raids. Halsey ordered him to send B-24s to assist in the bombing of ships fleeing the harbor. Twining preferred to bomb land installations or airfields. He did not think these were lucrative targets for his bombers. This showed the difference in an airmen's perspective of hitting fixed targets, versus a sailor's choice of hitting enemy ships.³⁸ Billy Mitchell, a pivotal figure in airpower development, may have disagreed with Twining in this instance, as part of his argument for an independent air force was the ability of airplanes to bomb ships.

Overall, the quest for Bougainville followed a similar path to the fight for New Georgia. During the initial period of the landings, the enemy tried numerous, large daylight attacks, without achieving results commensurate with aircraft losses. After the initial heavy attacks, the Japanese tapered off their activity and returned to night and early dawn attacks, but even the night attacks were now contested due to refined radar intercept procedures.³⁹

As the operation wound down, Twining continued to send his bombers against the fields at Bougainville, trying to keep the Japanese from repairing their runways. The joint air team had tremendous success and it was a monumental task for Twining to coordinate and employ such a wide variety of forces against the significant number and

³⁷ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 106.

³⁸ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 108.

³⁹ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 266.

types of targets. General Harmon recognized this and gave very favorable comments to Hap Arnold regarding his performance.⁴⁰

On December 11, planes flew over 170 sorties and without spotting a single Japanese aircraft.⁴¹ The enemy appeared to have abandoned any attempt to keep Bougainville. Rather than defend the Solomons from further attack, the Japanese withdrew their remaining carriers, heavy cruisers, and aircraft.⁴² The invasion of Bougainville gained the Allies several airfields within striking distance of Rabaul.⁴³ By December 15, the aviators of COMAIRSOLS advanced from Guadalcanal up to Bougainville, in position to initiate the future air onslaught against the Japanese at Rabaul.⁴⁴ The Solomon Islands were in Allied possession, thanks to the contribution of this unique joint air organization.

Conclusion

Twining left his command on November 20, just as COMAIRSOLS prepared for the air campaign to isolate Rabaul. Harmon had decided to send Twining back to the U.S. for some much-needed rest.⁴⁵ He arrived in the U.S. with the notion he was going back to the Pacific. Halsey, Fitch, and Harmon wanted him back as well. However, Arnold had other plans for him in Europe, the higher priority theater. Arnold blindsided Twining with the assignment, and told him to depart for Europe on Christmas night.⁴⁶ He was to relieve General Doolittle as Fifteenth Air Force Commander in Italy.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 262.

⁴¹ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 266.

⁴² McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 108.

⁴³ History of Thirteenth Air Force, File # 750.01. p. 5. Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁴⁴ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 280.

⁴⁵ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 111.

⁴⁶ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 112.

⁴⁷ Craven and Cate, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan*, 268.

Twining left behind what was arguably the most unique joint air command in U.S. history. Harmon summed up Twining's time as COMAIRSOLS in a letter to Thirteenth Air Force personnel:

"During this period [Twining's service as COMAIRSOLS], immeasurable damage was done to the enemy. His ships and barges were destroyed, all of the New Georgia group was overrun by our forces, Treasury was captured, and Bougainville was invaded, the Jap was subjected to heavy loss of aircraft and personnel, and his Bougainville airdromes were made untenable. As a result we have materially improved our position for further assaults on the enemy, and we have acquired important naval facilities and many fine additional airdromes. A great share of the credit for these victories goes to the Air Arm; to the airmen of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Royal New Zealand Air force, both shore and carrier based."⁴⁸

Twining's outstanding performance as COMAIRSOLS won deservedly high praise from Halsey as well. On the day of his departure, Halsey stated, "I wish to express my appreciation for the magnificent conduct of AIRSOLS under your aggressive leadership...your fighter covers, your strikers, and your searchers have turned in a performance far and beyond our hopeful expectations."⁴⁹ Halsey also offered Twining public praise via a New York Times article, in which he gave Twining full credit for knocking out Japanese air strength prior to the invasion.⁵⁰

Twining's year of study in ACTS, and the influence of Army Air leaders such as Arnold, left him with strong personal convictions on strategic attack.⁵¹ Despite these feelings, as a joint air commander, Twining realized the importance of combining all the capabilities of airpower to achieve success. His ability to put aside the service mindset,

⁴⁸ General Millard F. Harmon. Letter to Thirteenth Air Force Personnel, 16 Dec 1943. File #750.057, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁴⁹ Admiral William Halsey. Radio Message to Gen N.F. Twining, 20 Nov 1943. Box #117, Twining Files, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁰ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 111.

⁵¹ McCarley, "General Nathan Farragut Twining," 178. As Fifteenth Air Force Commander, Twining believed the only legitimate use of bombers was in long-range raids against enemy industries.

in an environment ill suited for an air power zealot's conception of strategic attack, allowed him to prosper as COMAIRSOLS.



Conclusion

The joint air operation in the Solomon Islands Campaign is poorly chronicled. While seldom mentioned, it has nonetheless been described as the best example of joint air operations prior to the Gulf War.¹ The case could be made that it was the best example period, because unlike in the Gulf War, the commanders in the Solomons were in a more difficult operational environment. In the Gulf War, there were more than enough resources to get the job done. Air leaders only needed to determine which resources to use and how to use them. In the Solomon Islands campaign, there were very few resources due to the “Germany first” strategy and other demands on air assets across the Pacific theater. Air leaders there had the more difficult decision of how to get the job done with so few assets. The Solomon air commanders overcame this obstacle by displaying innovation and achieving unity of effort, both of which are critical when survival is on the line.

In addition, where the Gulf War consisted of a six-month build up prior to operations, the assets in the Solomons were dynamic and because of aircraft rotations, a commander could be dealing with a significantly different capability and substantially different personnel from one week to the next.

Moreover, none of the flyers were used solely in accordance with their service specific training and doctrine. The Navy had to fly from shore-based installations; Army Air Force aircraft bombed ships; Navy and Army Air Force aircraft flew in support of ground troops fighting a jungle war; and Marine aircraft flew long-range interdiction sorties in addition to operating in support of ground troops. All of these missions were counter to the standard employment of their respective services.

¹ James A Winnefeld and Dana J. Johnson, *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942-1991* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 34.

There were some inter-service rivalries in the campaign, but they mostly existed above and below the level of COMAIRSOLS. Above, at the strategic level, leaders fought for resources and prestige for their service. Below, at the tactical level, differing living conditions and service rules caused animosity between aviators. Additionally, these aviators had very little prior exposure operating with members of another service. In contrast, aviators in the Gulf War had more familiarity with sister services and their capabilities.

There was little service rivalry exhibited by the Solomon Islands air commanders because they rose above parochial concerns and did what was best for their joint team. Their command's performance was a direct reflection on their own abilities. McCain and Halsey must also receive credit because they selected commanders suitable to the task.

Geiger's tenure was relatively free from service issues. In fact, following the war, many of the inter-service problems resolved themselves almost exactly in the way he thought they should; with an independent air force, and separate services reporting to civilian leaders. He also advocated the joint schooling and training that was created after the war.² This was a change in mindset for him, because prior to the war he disagreed with the creation of an independent air force.³ Perhaps his tenure at COMAIRCACTUS influenced his change in opinion.

Mitscher was a carrier commander, and became an aviator late in his career. He dealt with service rivalries in his command in the Solomons, which likely occurred because the Allies were gaining the upper hand. This gave his men freedom to worry about something other than survival. He handled these problems brilliantly though, and in the case of the Yamamoto shoot down, even undercut his own Navy planners

² General Roy S. Geiger to Retired Admiral Harry Yarnell, August, 1943. Box 10, Folder 142, PC 311. Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps, Quantico, VA.

³ James B. Wellons, "General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander." (Thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2007), 32.

so Army pilots who would fly the sortie could do the mission in the way they saw fit. Without this intervention, it is questionable whether Yamamoto would have been killed.

Finally, Twining, despite his close ties to Hap Arnold, was able to put aside Army Air Force political goals to operate his joint command in a way that was best for the mission. Ironically, his biggest problem, fighter coverage, was an issue that strategic air advocates previously determined obsolete. What inter-service differences did exist, such as bombing ships versus fixed installations, occurred due to different service experiences versus specific service agendas.

The joint air commanders benefited from examples set by tremendous senior leaders. Halsey believed from the beginning that all forces there were the “South Pacific Fighting Forces” and encouraged them not to behave in terms of Army, Navy, or Marines.⁴ He also set the policy of rotating the COMAIRSOLS position between the services.

Harmon was a good fit for his job as COMGENSOPAC. He was willing to burn bridges with Arnold in order to keep joint relations with his Navy compatriots. His previous experience in joint positions showed, and he was one of the few senior air leaders that never bought into the theory that the bomber would always get through.⁵ He championed the integrative nature of airpower, and believed success in the air required close cooperation with the other services.⁶

McCain also deserves credit for the success in the Solomons, because he was willing to relinquish operational control to forward commanders, who were in contact with the forces and had more situational awareness of the fight. This was a rare occurrence for a top

⁴ J. Britt McCarley, “General Nathan Farragut Twining: The Making of a Disciple of American Strategic Air Power, 1897-1953.” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1989), 62.

⁵ Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas About Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 168.

⁶ Thomas A. Hughes, “A General Airman: Millard Harmon and the South Pacific in World War II.” (*Joint Forces Quarterly* no. 52, 1st Quarter 2009), 157.

military commander, whose experience and personality usually leads to a tight grasp on command and control.

Unfortunately, lessons from the joint air campaign in the Solomon Islands were forgot or never learned beyond that theater. In Korea and Vietnam, service parochialism, differences in doctrine and capabilities, and separate command structures led to a complete breakdown of unity of effort. By the time of the Gulf War, it was not that the air leaders finally looked at the Solomon Islands Campaign and decided a JFACC would be a good idea; the joint structure was more of a byproduct of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, created due to command failures in previous wars.

The Solomon Islands provided a hallmark example of unity of effort, where air commanders worked as a joint team to be more efficient and effective, all while taking advantage of the synergistic effects of combined airpower. It was COMAIRSOLS, an outfit that started as a little rag-tag outfit, fighting for survival on a small island in the South Pacific, which helped change the tide in the Pacific War, and which remains today an effective example for joint air operations and unity of effort.

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